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Thuggin' with the Oldies: Successful Professionals Who Continue to Listen to Gangsta  
Rap and the Professional Identity Conflict that Arises

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

TaRhonda Thomas McKee

August 2013

Advisor: Lynn Schofield Clark, Ph.D.

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Title: Thuggin' with the Oldies: Successful Professionals Who Continue to Listen to Gangsta Rap and the Professional Identity Conflict That Arises

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of explicit rap music in the 1990's brought with it a challenge that has not been seen until today: what becomes of listeners who, once past their adolescent years, become responsible, successful adults yet choose to keep explicit rap music in their lives? This thesis examined that question to find that some high-achieving adults continue to listen to the controversial form of music, while simultaneously separating themselves from the images associated with the music. Furthermore, their musical tastes can present a conflict with their professional images which may cause them to conceal their preference for explicit rap music, thus separating their personal from their professional selves and not allowing every person the freedom to incorporate certain personal aspects of themselves in their professional identities. In addition, listeners of gangsta rap who have had successful careers as white-collar professionals find themselves engaging in levels of self-censorship, in order to keep their musical preferences hidden. This thesis therefore argues that those interested in professional identity development must consider how differing cultures are – or are *not* – welcomed in professional environments and whether those environments truly are striving to be more diverse and inclusive.

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## CHAPTER 1

*A group of successful, well-respected ladies in their 30's host a luncheon for college scholarship recipients. Dressed in their church-going attire, the ladies realize that they have neglected to have music provided for the event. At that moment, the group's leader—a woman in her 50's—asks the ladies 'Can one of you get your iPod from your car, put it on shuffle and plug it into the sound system?' There was dead silence as the ladies wrung their perfectly-manicured hands, exchanged awkward glances and came to the same realization. None could publicly play their shuffled music for fear of the audience hearing what was on their MP3 players: gangsta rap.*

It has been called the “evil dreck” and the cultural equivalent of drug dealing (“Operation Time Warner,” 1995, p. 8): gangsta rap. Characterized by hardcore lyrics and artists who may (or may not) have lived through the experiences described in those lyrics, the music genre has solidified its place beyond the classification of simply “rap.”

But what, really, is so-called gangsta rap? Technically, *The St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* labels it as the most controversial form of rap (Kubrin, 2005, p. 360). Some would argue that it is an art form— which purports to provide “an insider's look into black urban street life via crime and violence” (Kubrin, p. 361). Some would say it is an expression of a way of life with rules, or “street codes (Kubrin, p. 365),” that – in everything from attitudes towards police

to handshakes, dressing and dancing— differ widely from the experiences of suburban Americans. Others say it is a genre which, through its honesty and unfiltered lyrics, has become a permanent part of American pop culture (Miller, 2004). Some would call it a cash cow, as in recent years, the genre has consistently ranked in the top four for music genres in the country, with 27 million CD's selling in 2010 alone (Farber, 2007). Still others would classify rap as a senseless glorification of violence and immorality, destined to lead its listeners down the same path (Khan, 2007).

This study will explore the role of gangsta rap and explicit rap (with the terms being used interchangeably) in the lives of its listeners. But it will not focus on the listeners who have so-often been reflected in reports on the genre. Instead of impressionable tweens and teens, this study will focus on the very group that some would expect is least likely to enjoy the genre: high-achieving, college-educated, well-respected individuals – some of them parents—who have made gangsta rap a part of their lives. Using the research literature on professional identity as a framework, this study explores how professionals negotiate between the appeal they find in rap and explicit music and their felt sense that rap music is outside the bounds of “professional” life. How do these professionals experience rap as beyond those bounds, if they do? In which contexts do they reveal their enjoyment of this music, and where and how do they instead choose to hide this pleasure, if they do? And what happens when they do find compatriots in the



professional world? This study intends to explore these questions and give voice to an often-ignored group of consumers: high-achieving, professional adults who listen to gangsta rap. Those professionals have felt uncomfortable with revealing aspects of their personal selves, for fear of being stereotyped and shunned. Much of the literature on the development of professional identity speaks to ways in which people develop their professional identity with their performance and behavior at work. But the need still exists to address the shortcomings in professional identity research and include marginalized groups in such research.

Much of the previous research on gangsta rap has focused on its ill effects on young minds (Adams & Fuller, 2006, p.952). However, this study aims to fill a void by addressing the role of gangsta rap in the lives of people who are neither teens nor those who have experienced ill effects. This study will begin with a literature review from the perspective of authors and researchers who both appreciate and condemn the genre.

The research will also use interviews with adult gangsta rap fans to express the long-ignored voices of responsible adults who view explicit rap music as acceptable listening material for various reasons. As the participants will reveal, their high-achieving personalities, successful careers, responsible images and (in some cases) pristine upbringing run counter to the images of gangsta rap listeners brought forth in other studies. Some participants openly stress the

differences between their lives and the stories depicted in gangsta rap in order to protect their self-identity and professional identity.

This thesis will utilize qualitative data to analyze the role of explicit rap in the professional lives of modern-day adults. Through qualitative interviews, insight will be attained in order to understand the experience of adults, with an age range of mid-20's to mid-40's, who listen to gangsta rap. The study will also review information on rap music listening practices and explore how these relate to the practices of those in the interviewing sample. Explanations as to why they listen to the music and explorations regarding instances in which they had to defend or hide their choices will be gained through personal interviews with adult consumers of gangsta rap. The thesis will go on to review literature on the concept of professional identity and how it relates to contradictory behavior, such as a well-respected community leader listening to music with lyrics that are often criticized as being degrading. For the purpose of this thesis, the term "professional" is being limited to those in white-collar jobs and, in many cases, in managerial or entrepreneurial positions. That definition falls in line with one used in research by Holly S. Slay and Delmonize A. Smith, defining professional roles as "prestigious and provide the role holder with autonomy" (Slay & Smith, 2011, p.85). The nature of many of the subjects' professions causes the subjects to be elevated to a social classification that would be considered "high-profile," including (but not limited to) positions which entail a great deal of public

visibility, responsibility and high pay. First, however, the thesis will begin with a review of current literature on the history of hip-hop and the rise of gangsta rap, which includes a review of the long-standing battles over whether the genre is an *art form* or an *attack* on all that is moral and good, which has been a criticism of explicit rap since its inception from those social and professional groups who disapprove of its lyrics and, in many cases, the people behind those lyrics.

Exploring such a topic could be beneficial to both professionals and to companies seeking to incorporate diversity, as this study brings to light the contradiction that listening to gangsta rap poses in their professional images. As this thesis will discuss, research into professional identities and the professional workplace has advocated for cultural inclusiveness, yet has not explored how the felt ability to express one's personal taste relates to the creation of an inclusive workplace. This thesis therefore aims to fill this gap. The research also explores how those professionals seek to overcome those conflicts, by either completely concealing their fondness for gangsta rap or by trying to reveal their musical preference in environments in which they feel secure. The research is not only impactful to explicit rap fans, but to fans of all genres of music, film and other forms of entertainment who feel as though their interests cannot be revealed for fear of harsh judgment.

*Note from the Researcher: This study has personal significance, as I am among the millions of listeners of explicit rap music but am also a successful professional*

*who maintains a fairly high-profile public image. I began listening to explicit rap music in middle school, urged on by the other students in my private high school. Despite my classmates' and my upbringings in largely middle or upper-middle class two-parent households with, in many cases, college-educated mothers and fathers, many of us were intrigued by the lyrics and personalities behind gangsta rap. We felt as though the stories depicted in the songs, on some level, spoke to us. The connections with the songs varied from typical teenage angst to reminders of tough circumstances in which we may have felt isolated. For example, before moving to our all-White suburban neighborhood, my family lived in an inner-city area filled with violence. Witnessing convenience store robberies was not uncommon for my siblings and me. Even though my parents sought to shield and protect us by moving to a better neighborhood, my siblings and I still felt a connection to the "old neighborhood." Gangsta rap reminded me of some of the times and people that I'd left behind. And the form of music has stayed with me since. Through the years, I have grown to appreciate the rappers and the stories they tell. While I do not endorse or engage in any of the violent, disrespectful behavior often discussed in gangsta rap songs, I can appreciate the feelings expressed by the rappers and I look at many songs as an opportunity to see "where they are coming from." The scenario described in the introduction of this thesis is a true story, which contributed to the development of the idea behind this thesis. I was among the group of "respectable" women whose musical preference would have come as a surprise to attendees of that luncheon. My high-profile*

*career puts me in the public eye and, to many people who I have confided in, seems unfitting of a gangsta rap fan. Exploring my own experiences lead me to ask the question of whether other professionals and parents have been put in similar situations and how they reconcile their fondness for such a controversial form of music with their identities as working professionals.*

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ROOTS OF RAP MUSIC

In a world of disco and punk rock, there seemed to be no commercial demand for spoken words over beats in the 1970s, particularly from the years of 1973 to 1979, which was a time when disco ruled the airwaves (Tan, 2008, p. 83). The music was laced with beats that not only inspired dance moves, those beats were also said to be absorbed into the brain, making the tunes (literally) *infectious* (Lin, p.88). The popular genre was a far cry from the words being rapped on street corners, with non-singing artists delivering messages about their plights and daily lives. Those experiences were shared by many in America, even if they were infrequently heard.

A blue-collar, honest living was all that many lower to middle class Americans aspired to make for themselves by the 1970s (Rose, 1994, p.27). Trade schools that taught young people how to become electricians and auto mechanics were in-demand, but modern technology caused many of those skill sets to fall out of demand (Rose, p.35). Assembly lines dominated by robotic machines replaced the countless workers who once put together everything from television sets to cars, by hand. By the 1970s, the rise of increasingly mechanized workplaces combined with the inexpensive imported goods from newly-opened Asian markets resulted in much more than a change of class and careers (Cross, 1992,

p.4-6). It also resulted in a loss of hope for many young people who had just finished learning the trade that they thought would be the key to a stable, albeit relatively simple, lifestyle. In the 1970s, urban cities across the country experienced simultaneous high rates of job loss, increases in crimes and noticeable loss of population, much of these occurrences due to a loss of industrial jobs and housing opportunities (Jonnes, 2002). Such hard times can come to shape a community in which “Poverty, unemployment, family disruption and isolation from mainstream America define the neighborhood context for residents in many inner-city neighborhoods” (Kubrin, p. 361). With so much turmoil at the time, The Bronx seemed like the death place of the blue-collar worker. And, simultaneously, several historical factors positioned the New York borough to become the birthplace of modern-day rap.

The bright lights of the disco shone across the country, influencing everything from dancing to fashion. White polyester pants suits dominated not only the dance floor, but the radio airwaves. Dancing to disco music had become a “seamless and fluid affair” (Rose, p.47). Disco had gained such popularity that DJ’s took the places of actors in the minds and hearts of the genre’s faithful (Lin, p. 89). The popular music group Chic sang of “Good Times” in their hit song, named the number one song of 1979:

*Let’s cut the rug, a little jive and jitterbug  
We want the best, we won’t settle for less  
Don’t be a drag, participate*

*Clams on the half shell and roller skates, roller skates*  
-“Good Times,” Chic

However the flashy, happy, sexy “good times” of disco were not a reflection of the times for everyone. During a post-industrial American society, inner-city youth and young adults who had trained to make a living in fields like manufacturing, mechanics and production found themselves without any viable job options. A young man who, at one point, spent his weekdays reviewing blueprints for a drafting company found himself without a job, as computer automation rendered his skills useless. Another young man found himself in the same fate, as his training as an electronics repairman became less valuable. With no viable job options, those men turned to another form of entertainment, which would soon become a form of employment. They became D.J. Red Alert and Grandmaster Flash, respectively: two of the biggest figures in the early history of hip-hop (Rose, p.35). As worthy of attention as their experiences were, this people like D.J. Red Alert and Grandmaster Flash rarely heard their stories reflected in the music of the time. Old-fashioned blues, soul and R & B spoke to older generations. Yet, younger generations had not quite found their voice, musically.

The missing voice began to emerge out of a long-standing African American practices. The tradition of toasting (also heavily influential in Jamaican culture) played itself out on the streets of inner-city neighborhoods alongside verbal tag-teams such as the “dozens” (a round-robin of boasts on oneself coupled



with challenges to an opponent). Intertwined in the rhythmic, rhyming spoken word were the influences of notable figures ranging from James Brown, for his half-spoken-half-sung vocal delivery, to Gil Scott-Heron, for his political storytelling (Ramsey, 2003, p. 150). As adolescents and young adults found the rhythms of their own words, rapping (also known as “emceeing”) began to carve out its own culture in the South Bronx. Coupled with the three other elements of hip hop -- graffiti, breakdancing and DJ’ing-- (Ralph, 2009, p. 142), rap created an underground scene, with block parties that arose wherever a DJ could plug his turntables and in hallways and sidewalks, where breakdancers competed to be named the best in their neighborhood (Rose, p. 48).

Their braggadocios style made it clear that many rappers wanted to be noticed in their neighborhoods and beyond. Author Tricia Rose noted that it is naive to think that hip hop graffiti artists, breakdancers, DJ’s and rappers never wanted to be noticed—or paid.

“It is a common misperception among hip hop artists and cultural critics that during the early days, hip hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible. The problem was not that they were uniformly uninterested in profit; rather, many of the earliest practitioners were unaware that they could profit from their pleasure. Once this link was made, hip hop artists began marketing themselves wholeheartedly.” (Rose, p. 40)

The first group to achieve that wholehearted marketing strategy of hip hop was a group known as the Sugar Hill Gang. Their debut song, “Rapper’s Delight,” was released in 1979. Ironically, the previously-unrepresented voices of youth

who were struggling to overcome hard times were finally heard through a song that sampled the song “Good Times.” Rapper’s Delight featured members of the Sugar Hill Gang rapping over the disco-heavy beat. But, instead of “Good Time’s” lyrics telling of “*clams on the half shell and roller skates,*” “Rapper’s Delight” took a humorous approach to the urban lifestyle with which many youth at the time could identify, telling the stories in a way and with a language that was very personal to anyone who had enjoyed toasting or a game of the dozens.

*Have you ever went over to a friend’s house to eat  
And the food just ain’t no good  
I mean the macaroni’s soggy, the peas are mushed  
And the chicken tastes like wood*  
--“Rapper’s Delight”, Sugar Hill Gang

The good-natured lyrics detailing misadventures of a group of young men from parties, to encounters with young women and unsavory dinners at a friend’s house were appealing to a mass audience. Within a year, the album had sold millions of copies and topped the pop charts (Rose, p. 56). It was a song that opened the door for many others to follow. But this happy-go-lucky image was not to be the sole classification of rap music. By experiencing such wide acclaim and acceptance, the Sugar Hill Gang had opened the door for artists, such as the chart-topping rapper Snoop Dogg, known for their links to *real* gangs. (Meadows, Breur & Orr, 2005, p. 99)

## THE RISE OF GANGSTA RAP

With rap sheets that included charges of murder, assault with a deadly weapon and sexual assault, one would assume that men like Lesane Parish Crooks, Andre Romelle Young and Marion Knight would be paying their debts to society either in prison or by trying to re-ascend the social and professional ladder of working-class America. However, instead of trying to make a mediocre existence Crooks, Young and Knight were living lavish lifestyles by the mid-1990s, better known by their rap aliases: Tupac Shakur (Crooks), Dr. Dre (Young) and Suge Knight (Knight) (“Operation Time Warner,” p. 8).

By the late 1980s rap was in the regular rotation on MTV (Rose, p. 4). And just as MTV pop icons such as Madonna began to push boundaries with her provocative lyrics and dance moves, so did musicians who made their living in the realm of rap. The desperate economic and social times that gave rise to rap in the South Bronx had also been occurring in areas of California, particularly near Los Angeles, Compton and Watts. Those hardships manifested themselves in a much different way. As detailed in the 2011 VH1 Documentary “Planet Rock: The Story of Hip Hop and the Crack Generation, (2011),” a number of young men in impoverished neighborhoods viewed the crime of dealing drugs, specifically crack cocaine, as their only way out of poverty. That path, for many of them, crossed over into the hip hop world as a number of former drug dealers, including Snoop Dogg, became rappers. That experience created the foundation for much of

today's gangsta rap as, noted in the documentary, "the very kids dealing crack were turning their street tales into hit records." With gang members serving as pioneers of the gangsta rap genre, the music reflected the rappers' personal experiences, portraying "gang and ghetto life from a criminal's perspective" (Krimms, 2000, p. 70). It was a perspective that had been missing from the music industry and apparently from the lives of eager listeners, as gangsta rap quickly gained a fan following. By the year 2000, it had become the top-grossing genre of music in the country, accounting for about 100 million album sales, annually (Beaver, 2010, p. 112).

The tales of violence and misogyny that turned people like National Political Congress of Black Women Chair C. DeLores Tucker against gangsta rap were the very same elements that drew in listeners and consumers who were either connected to or intrigued by such stories. Hip hop journalist Robin Ro likened some gangsta rappers to role models, for young black men who had no other male figures in their lives. (Ro, 1996). Bragging of illegal acts, such as drug dealing and robbery, gained those musical artists favor among audiences who were hungering for an edgier, rawer style of music. And, while methods such as the addition of Parental Advisory stickers in 1985 sought to deter young listeners and warn their parents of explicit content, the stickers may have actually attracted young people, destined to taste the "forbidden fruit" that seemed even more enticing with the addition of a warning label (Christenson, 2006, p. 106).

Rappers were all-too-happy to provide listeners with what they desired: more tales directly from the streets. Rapper Snoop Dogg was not only acquitted on a murder charge, he turned that charge into the 1994 album *Murder Was the Case*, which went platinum... twice. He and other rappers were also eager for listeners to know that the things about which they were rapping were, indeed, real:

*If I rap about it nigga I done lived it out.  
It ain't shit I'm fantasizing. This shit been bout.  
I'm a ghetto mother fucker, keep a K with a drum.  
Quick to do a nigga something, I don't give a fuck.*

--"Gangsta Nigga" – *Hot Boys* (Rapped by: BG)

Real men – with real criminal pasts—had become real recording artists, thanks to the emerging acceptance of gangsta rap among rap fans. But their professional celebrity status did not come without criticism.

Lawmakers and housewives, alike, sought to stop the proliferation of gangsta rap, unable to understand its appeal and concerned that it would lead young people to a life of crime. Opponents sought to have gangsta rap banned, appealing to congressmen and record company executives, alike. In 1995, Tucker joined with former U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett to pay a visit to executives of Time Warner (Beaver, p. 112). That record label, at the time, was responsible for producing a number of groups that fit into the gangsta rap genre. But executives were reluctant, at best, to even agree with the notion that explicit lyrics could be seen as offensive (Beaver, p. 112). Not even the all-powerful

Oprah Winfrey could successfully combat the force that was growing behind this new genre of music. Her focus on gangsta rap for two episodes of her highly-successful talk show inspired organizations like the NAACP to organize campaigns like STOP, which sought to “discourage derogatory language by rappers, including the use of ‘bitch,’ ‘ho,’ and the n-word to say nothing of the violence that is often the central theme of gangsta rap” (Beaver, p. 108). A look at only one verse from one modern-day rap song shows that the NAACP’s campaign was unsuccessful.

Tucker even took her grievances to Capitol Hill, convincing lawmakers to hold congressional hearings on the content of explicit rap (Beaver, p. 112). She maintained, though, that her grievances were not with the rappers but with the recording industry that manufactured the music. Tucker and Bennett maintain that their reasoning fell on deaf ears, as record company executives refused to discontinue production of explicit rap albums (Beaver, p. 113). The reason, for some people, may have been in defense of the rappers’ First Amendment right to freedom of speech. However, there is no denying that the power of the dollar also played a role in record companies’ decisions to continue producing explicit rap because if the product did not generate a profit for the record companies, it would not have continued to be produced and released.

During the height of the debate over whether to censor or even sell gangsta rap, one fact became apparent: the genre was not a fad that was destined

to fade away. However explicit or seemingly offensive the lyrics were, they still drew an audience. That audience was not discouraged – but perhaps *encouraged*—by the negative reaction that gangsta rap evoked with parents, lawmakers, religious figures and other organizations. As record company executives saw the demand increase among consumers, the demand for gangsta rappers also increased among major record labels with major labels appearing on the record charts more than five times more often than independent record labels in a 12-year-period between 1988 and 1995 because of gangsta rap singles (Beaver, p. 116). But much of their success was hidden within subsidiaries of the record labels. Dr. Dre was one of the first gangsta rap pioneers to receive a major deal—not to make his own albums but to create a mass of content via Dr. Dre’s label Ruthless Records through Epic Records, a subsidiary of Sony records. Sony’s interest in Dr. Dre was seen as an indication of the popularity and profitability of rap music (Beaver, p. 111).

The metamorphosis of gangsters into rappers and label executives continued. Death Row Records CEO Suge Knight is said to have created history’s most successful record labels owned by an African American (Ro, p. 2). However, his rise to the top is said to have included incidents in which he “threatened his competition with lead pipes, slapped people with pistols , and fired shots at their heads” (Ro, p. 3). But consumers were not discouraged by

rumors of Knight's tactics. In just four years, Death Row Records sold more than 18 million albums and made more than \$325 million dollars. (Ro, p. 2)

Less than a decade into the emergence of gangsta rap, the genre was generating upwards of \$30 million a year for the Warner Music record label alone ("Operation Time Warner," p. 9). Three other major record companies share the profit with Warner to largely control the gangsta rap market: EMI, Vivendi and Sony. The reason behind their continuous pursuit of the next rap superstar is made evident in the popularity that modern day rappers enjoy on the Billboard Top 100 Charts. Rapper (and former crack dealer) Jay-Z, who has been referred to as "bigger than Shakespeare" (McKeown, 2011, p.87) has enjoyed record –setting success. When, in 2009, he reached the benchmark of having 11 number one albums on the Billboard Top 100 charts, he sealed his place—and perhaps rap's place—in history ("Access Hollywood," 2009). Whose record did he surpass? None other than "The King," himself, Elvis Presley.



## RELATING TO GANGSTA RAP

Now that a history of gangsta rap has been established, it is key to note how the genre has connected with fans who made the product popular and, thus, sustainable. In this section, I will review the ways that rap has been addressed in literature on music and fandom in order to establish a background on how rap has been studied in relation to audiences. I will then point out a contradiction that occurs in some of these studies of rap fans, noting that whereas some fans view rap's appeal as particular to the need to challenge mainstream authority others view its appeal as less contextually-specific and therefore able to be applied to any person's life—even privileged teens who make up part of the gangsta rap fan base. As will be seen, fans have related to gangsta rap by making the emotions portrayed in the music applicable to everyday life situations such as frustration with a lack of income. The contextually-specific aspect of explicit rap is important, for it establishes that rap has been understood differently among varied communities. Those fans who come from backgrounds less interested in challenging the status quo define the music's appeal in relation to personal problems, which is consistent with the way that professionals also discuss the music, as we will see in the findings section. We begin with a review of the literature that demonstrates rap's appeal across socioeconomic lines.

The hardcore lyrics of rap are often associated with the angst of hard living (Rose,60). Its growth from the mean streets of the Bronx to gangster-filled

areas of Compton, for example, have created an image of not just rappers but rap listeners. In his book *Have Gun Will Travel: the Spectacular Rise and Fall of Death Row Records*, hip-hop journalist Ronin Ro draws a major connection between rap and African American youth who do not have role models (Ro, p.2). Although lyrics about harsh upbringings can connect with listeners who are in similar situations, people who live opposite (and quite privileged) lives can also appreciate the messages in gangsta rap.

Not all rap fans share the crime-filled lifestyles so often described in explicit hip-hop songs. Many rap consumers live quite the opposite life. By 2010, it had been revealed that 70% of rap consumers were white suburban teens (Beaver, p.109). The entertainment value of rap music is undoubtedly one of the factors that sent the genre roaring up the charts, surpassing pop music in the Billboard Top 40 charts beginning in 2003 (Taylor, 2004, p. 13). But rap music is not simply a form of entertainment in the eyes of devoted listeners. It can take on many meanings and purposes, depending on a variety of factors, including the personal lives of its listeners. This section will evaluate the meanings rap music (including gangsta/explicit forms) has held for persons who enjoy the genre. Studies have looked at how gangsta rap can be used as a mood management tool, how it helps listeners personally identify with others (including the rappers, themselves) and how rap music can serve as an object for social change. The section will offer insight into what rap fans gain by listening to their preferred

music. From therapy to unity, the draw of explicit rap varies for its fans. As will be explored, next, many of those fans feel connected to explicit rappers through personal commonalities they share, including their geographical ties.

## REPRESENTING FOR THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Fans of the genre feel a sense of personal identification with gangsta rap. That sense of identification could be derived from personal struggles, triumph or even pride in one's hometown, state or region of the country. Hollywood may seem a million miles away to an adult or teen in New Orleans' Harmony Oaks, formerly known as the C.J. Peete Housing Projects and more famously nicknamed the Magnolia Projects (also known as "Tha Nolia"). At one point in time, the housing project was infamously labeled with the highest murder rate in New Orleans at a time when that city had the highest murder rate in the country (News One, 2011). Statistics from that city also prove a disparaging gap in wealth among the races, with the median income for white households being twice that of black households (Warner & Scallan, 2002). But the city of New Orleans is also home to stories of success that have come out of seeming despair. Many of those stories are told in gangsta rap. The Magnolia housing project is home to Cash Money Records Recording Artists Juvenile, whose 1998 album *400 Degrees* went four-times platinum. Stories like his, and the stories told in his raps, resonate with young people who are from the New Orleans area, relating to hyper-local lyrics such as:

*"I mean, me myself, I just don't wanna see nobody get hurt  
Wanna live? Keep your black ass from out of my turf  
You look like wanna of them boyz That ain't never been fucked  
over I'm bout to change that, send that boy to tha Nolia."*

-- "Welcome 2 Tha Nolia," Juvenile

Instead of having a neighborhood name associated with nameless, faceless violence on the evening news, residents of areas like the Magnolia projects now had their neighborhood's name associated with a multi-platinum entertainer, who gained fame around the world. The art of "representing" one's neighborhood, city, state or region has become a defining element in rap and has been linked to the fact that marginalized communities are rarely represented in a positive light in the mainstream media (Miller, 2004, p. 177). Representing those places via rap lyrics not only associates the rapper with a certain base audience, it also associates that audience with the rapper's accomplishments bringing along with it a sense of pride in one's background, albeit humble.

Juvenile, himself, is aware of the fact that, in addition to his lyrics, his way of speaking in a heavy New Orleans accent influenced by Creole French and a general Southern drawl also resonates with people. "People love my accent because it's so different," he said in an interview with *The Washington Post*. "I'm from the South, and you from way up north and you hear the way I talk, that flip you clean out... My style is ghetto, project, off-the-porch flowing, that's what I call it" (Miller, p.197). It is a style shared by a number of rappers who have dubbed their region of the country (including major cities such as New Orleans, Miami, Houston, Atlanta and Memphis) as "The Dirty South" (Miller, p. 190). Gangsta rappers who place themselves in that regional grouping take pride in their Southern accents, clothing styles, eating habits and even ancestral heritages, with

some rappers addressing the still-present devastating effects of slavery in Southern Cities:

*“See life’s a bitch then you figure out  
Why you really got dropped in the Dirty South.  
See in third grade this is what you told  
You was bought, you was sold.”*  
--“Police Brutality,” Success-N-Effect

The varying styles of Dirty South, West Coast and East Coast rappers are well-documented (Miller, 2006). Rap artists are known to create images and styles that reflect their backgrounds and cater to listeners who are living under similar circumstances. Tricia Rose points out the 1980s as a key point in the development of a Los Angeles-based “West Coast style of rap that narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life a spoor, young, black male subject in Los Angeles” (Rose, p. 59). At the same time, Spanish-speaking rappers such as Kid Frost and El General began introducing the world to bilingual rap just as guitar rock-laced beats of Run DMC songs made that group’s music speak to a generation of teens prompting the *New York Times* to declare that rap had “finally reached the mainstream (Rose, p. 58).”

Having rappers and explicit songs become a part of mainstream opens the genre up to audiences who may not have originally been counted among its fans. That leads to an opportunity for a variety of people to interpret and utilize the music in a variety of ways. The next section will look at the ways that listeners of

gangsta rap personalize the messages portrayed in those songs for purposes ranging from entertainment to mood management.

## PERSONALIZING GANGSTA RAP

The declaration that rap songs by Dirty South artists had resonated with listeners across the country, speaks volumes. It demonstrates that the regionally-inspired messages and styles of Dirty South rappers are shared by some of the fans who helped propel them to success. But even those fans who have not had the experiences of growing up in certain parts of the country, living in housing projects and dealing drugs feel as though they can relate to the lyrics of gangsta rap. “When you listen to hip hop, it’s a whole world that comes with it,” said one participant in a study that grouped African American, Caucasian and Asian college students in an effort to understand their devotion to rap music (Iwamoto et al., p. 343). Those students cited feelings of being able to “identify” with what rappers spoke of, causing them to feel “I am not the only one going through this crap” (Iwamoto et al., p 344) and relate to songs “that you can relate to personally, about transgressions, trials and tribulations that you encounter in life” (Iwamoto et al., p. 343). Iwamoto’s research revealed a point also raised in this study: “The depth and meaning attributed to rap music was dependent upon the type of fan” (p. 343). It further explains why different rap fans have such varying personal connections to explicit rap music.

In the rap song “Paid in Full,” Rakim (of 1980’s rap group Eric B. and Rakim) not only rapped about his money woes. He went on to rap about his former life, robbing people for cash and valuables, and continuing his tale with



the story of how he has turned his life around to make money in a legitimate way. Not every rap song has such a positive message. But that does not matter to all rap fans who may feel that even the harsh messages transcend race, with messages being universally relatable to anyone who has ever felt emotions ranging from elation to frustration. It is a point reinforced by participants in Iwamoto's research, one of whom stated: "It's not just a Black thing anymore... it spreads a cause across regions and cultures and just addresses everybody's needs and relations" (Iwamoto, p. 343).

Perhaps further support of such a statement can be found in Mongolia, where rap began to find an audience in the early 2000s (Marsh, 2010, p. 350). For youth who were in their teens and early 20's, rap began representing their generation, even though it was being delivered by rap stars who were quite the opposite of the typical Mongolian teens (Marsh, p.350). The baggy 'street thug' clothing and explicit lyrics, though, struck a chord with Mongolian youth who began rapping, themselves, while emphasizing that rap was the perfect way to criticize those in power in Mongolian society (Marsh, p. 353). Yet again, rap is being personalized by its listeners to apply to their individual situations and reflect their feelings. Youth in France have also embraced rap as a "social and cultural phenomenon," as it began to change the way they presented themselves to the world (Miranda & Claes, 2004, p. 113-122). Such examples demonstrate the fact that gangsta rap has the ability to appeal to audiences, such as participants in

this study, who may not share the violent backgrounds or experiences depicted in some explicit rap songs, but still feel an inescapable pull towards the music.

The power of music in affecting moods has been the subject of much research, with some of those researchers suggesting that the power of music to influence one's mood is "obvious" (North, Tarrant & Hargreaves, 2004, p. 267). Studies suggest that differing musical styles can alter the moods of participants, making some more willing to give to charities after listening to music described as "uplifting" (North et al., p. 271). Music can also have the opposite effect, with one study claiming that hard rock and rap songs are likely to make state mental health hospital patients behave in inappropriate manners (Harris, Clarke, Bradley & Titus, 1992) While, quite the opposite, other researchers have found that heavy metal music can help teenage boys to calm down (Arnette, 1991). The variety of studies—and their results—prove that music has different meanings and purposes for its listeners. Rather than dismissing gangsta rap as dangerous or demeaning, the studies show that gangsta rap is not to be excluded from that category of mood-management tools. Such a point is important to link to this thesis, as participants in this study note that the lure of the music extends beyond knowing the latest chart-topping songs. As will be seen in the latter parts of this research, the fans note that explicit rap is powerful enough to change their moods—for better or worse—with and without their knowledge. A force that powerful can

become part of a participants' social identity, making it difficult to dismiss as just a fad.

Artists and record labels are very aware of the connection that music has with its listeners. That is why artists like rapper Tyga, whose songs include explicit lyrics, target their products to match the multiple moods of listeners. "It's always good to have something for every(one)," he said in *Billboard* Magazine, "Because it could be people that don't want to party and don't want to listen to 'Rack City' (Ranked in February of 2012 as the No. 3 rap song on the Billboard charts)... I don't want to listen to party music all day. And I don't want to listen to slow music or more depressing... songs all day either" (Delerme, 2012, p. 58). Rentfrow, Goldberg and Levitin have a more scientific approach to Tyga's sentiment. Their studies show that musical preferences are rooted in a five-factor structure that relates to emotional responses to music, not the genre in particular (Rentfrow, Goldberg & Levitin, 2011, p. 1152). Those emotional responses can be driven by the music's characteristics, including "distorted" or "loud" sound-related attributes and "aggressive" or "intelligent" psychological attributes (Rentfrow et al., p. 1153). Such research could help point to why rap music has been seen as powerful tool for mood management. It could also explain why some of the participants in this thesis will describe being drawn simply to the beats and the rhythmic arrangements of the music while ignoring the words. Marketing executives have certainly noted the fact that successful professionals, who were

with rap in its infancy, remain loyal to gangsta rap, with one noting “There’s no reason (rappers) can’t have careers like rockers... We’re going to tap into this base... a fan base that’s 35 to 40 years old with two kids” (Jurgensen, p.2). Those in the business of making a profit off of explicit rap music are well aware that the genre has mature fans who have stayed loyal.

The impact of explicit rap can also be a very personal one, affecting the moods of its listeners. Rappers know that they can have a personal appeal that mimics a relationship, when listeners feel as though they share a commonality with rappers such as Tyga who admits “You can’t just love somebody overnight... It’s about growing on somebody over time” (Delerme, p.58). As this study will reveal, responses to explicit rap lyrics vary from the anger to excitement, eliciting connections in disparate settings.

President Barack Obama has even been known to use his iPod to escape the pressures that come along with being commander-in-chief. When questioned about the contents of his iPod by a reporter from *Rolling Stone*, Obama replied that he listened to a variety of music. That variety included multiple selections from rappers Lil’ Wayne and Jay Z (Wenner, 2010) Both rappers have made a career out of writing raps inspired by tough upbringings, which include everything from drug dealing to murder. While Obama did not have similar experiences in his personal life, studies suggest that hearing such stories of angst

expressed in explicit rap can serve as a “coping mechanism and an outlet for frustration.” (Iwamoto et al., p. 346)

Further explaining the power of rap music to draw in its listeners and change their moods is the fact that rap has also been used as an intervention tool for youth in therapy (Tyson, 2002). The words and sounds expressing emotions that range from love, to frustration to rage are used in different ways by rap listeners who vary the frequency of their listening depending on their moods (Iwamoto et al., p. 343), leading rap to have a “profound psychological and emotional effect on its fans.” (Iwamoto et al., p. 347). Counselors have even gone so far as to assign rap music as homework assignments for clients, asking them to write down their thoughts on a particular song or artist (Iwamoto et al., p. 349). Rappers and music executives are aware of the power of a song. For instance, both parties engage in “constructing specific emotional ‘hooks’ that bring audiences into contact with specific emotional subcultures.” (Ryan, Calhoun & Wentworth, 1996, p. 121).

Those opportunities for social commentary are also opportunities for gangsta rap fans to further connect with the genre. As will be explored in the next section, explicit rap also has the power to mobilize its audience into action about political and social issues that extend beyond hash urban environments and are, thus, relatable to a wide variety of listeners.

## RAP AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES

The power of creating the potential for social transformation is another factor in the relationship that rap music has with its fans. A sense of empowerment from songs by the politically-outspoken rap group Public Enemy, for example, led one fourth-generation Japanese American who grew up in a middle class family to seek a career in counseling psychology, in order to help disenfranchised populations (when he is not occupied teaching hip hop analysis classes) (Iwamoto et al., p. 342). Such a power to inspire social change could be the reasoning behind rap being referred to as the “contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless.” (Rose, 101) In what other realm do persons from long-forgotten government housing projects or streets scenes get the listening ears of millions of people to speak of the social injustices that have become a way of life in their neighborhoods? That way of life has been said to make rappers privy to social problems long before they are acknowledged by the mainstream media. So incidents like the beating of Los Angeles resident Rodney King by police officers came as no surprise to rappers such as Ice T. In an interview asking for his commentary on a story that had polarized the nation, the West Coast rapper simply stated “I’ve been yelling about the police for so long... I’ve been on the other end of that stick in real life” (Light, 1992, p.15)

Rapper L.L. Cool J. spoke of one such situation in his 1990 song “Illegal Search.” He details a dark, cold night on the New Jersey turnpike in which he was

pulled over for no apparent reason. L.L.'s rap is actually a commentary on the issue of racial profiling, which came at a time when one such racial profiling story had made headlines in New Jersey. A couple maintained their innocence against charges of possessing cocaine and assaulting a New Jersey State Trooper who had pulled them over on the New Jersey turnpike. Their attorney poured over years of records to prove that police had been targeting African American drivers in late-model cars with out-of-state license plates (such as the couple had). That case, coupled with L.L.'s story, inspired the referencing of experts such as a Rutgers University professor who uncovered statistics which he believe proved patterns of racial discrimination and profiling among New Jersey law enforcement officials. (Rose,p. 112) Perhaps that is the reason why a number of rappers (and rap songs in general) are associated with a distrust of mainstream opinion, which often runs counter to the events experienced in the lives of many urban African Americans (Ryan et al., p. 125). This also serves as an example of the fact that explicit rap often runs counter to mainstream opinion, thereby creating a conflict for professionals who want to be accepted into the mainstream. Therefore those professionals, as will be revealed in the research portion of this thesis, make very careful decisions about whether to reveal their personal musical tastes to colleagues.

Public Enemy is one rap group that has promoted the power of rap music for social change from the group's inception. The group's lyrics are often critical

of U.S. government officials to such a degree that some wonder if the group was targeted for investigation by federal leaders (Potash, 2008, p. 139). As leader of the group Public Enemy, rapper Chuck D. also led a push to stop advertisements for alcoholic beverages in some urban communities. His group also launched a program to educate members of the media on the experiences of urban youth in order to heighten their sensitivity to issues that may otherwise go unnoticed (Armoudian, 1994, p. 48). That rap group is among those who have been known to make concerts feel more like rallies by using their performances “to address current social issues, media miscoverage, and other problems that especially concern black America.” (Rose, p. 134)

Such positive outcomes of rappers and rap music may lead one to believe that rap is widely-accepted, no matter the social or economic standing of its listeners. However, as the next section of this paper explains, much value is put into the practice of maintaining an identity that speaks to a person’s level of success and professionalism. And rap does not necessarily fit into that image.



## CHAPTER 3

### DEFINING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

There are several theories of identity that are popularly embraced within media studies. First is the psychological approach to identity. This is generally associated with psychologists such as Eric Erickson, who researcher Wim Meeus refers to in his study of identity development among adolescents. Meeus emphasized the idea that “personal identity develops progressively during adolescence” (2011, p. 75). In the same breath, however, Meeus alludes to perceived shortcomings with Erickson’s perspective for failing to take into consideration differing cultural experiences, stating that “many individuals do not change identity, especially ethnic identity” (Meeus, p. 75). These scholars look at identity as part of a natural developmental process. In media studies, researchers such as Katie Davis (2009) note how media can reflect the developmental stages of an adolescent. In an analysis of teenage girls’ blogs, Davis noticed that the embarrassment reflected in younger girls’ blogs are a stark contrast to the “sense of stability and confidence” they display as they mature. Specifically analyzing rap music, Eric H. Tyson (2012) adopts this developmental approach to identity to look at how rap may have a negative effect on young people as they are growing up. Tyson cites research that teens who watched more rap music videos were more likely to be materialistic, violent towards teachers and less likely to go to

college (2012, p.238). In his own research, Tyson concluded that adolescents who listen to rap music for “entertainment value” are more likely to experience “poor school outcomes” (Tyson, p. 250). According to the developmental approach, identity is fully formed by the end of the adolescent years. Others, however, see this differently. Therefore, the research included in this thesis will reveal the stories of adults who began listening to explicit rap music during their adolescent years and achieved high academic and professional success. Such will support the notion that identity can continue to develop after the adolescent years.

The second approach to identity is that of sociologists such as Erving Goffman, who argued that identity was best understood in interaction, because of how our response to others shapes who we are and how we perceive ourselves. Ned Weidner (2010) notes that preferences in personal activities, such as music, change as young people go through various stages since “identity is not a stable core; it grows and builds depending on our communities, social interactions, and power relationships” (p. 11). Weidner focused his research on college students and their example of the role of identity in individual development as it relates to having a diverse student body, which he believed helped “construct students’ identities and shape who they are more than anyone” (p. 14).

In media studies, scholars such as Peter Wade and Georgina Born have been especially interested in how people use fashion, music, or art to say something about themselves to others, whether that is through what they wear or

how they communicate something about themselves to others in online performances of identity. Blacks in Colombia were found to construct their identities around their preference in music (Wade, 2002). Working-class, darker skinned Blacks in Colombia traditionally centered their entertainment around salsa and vallenato music, which was often accompanied by dancing, leading to an image of darker-skinned Colombians among European cultures as being “‘naturally’” open, relaxed, musical and party-loving” (p. 23). At the same time, lighter-skinned Colombians, often Mestizos, frowned upon the type of music and dancing enjoyed by their darker-skinned counterparts, giving music much more than an entertainment value in 1980s Colombia. Born (2011) articulates such power of music when he endorses the idea that genres of music are constructed by certain social groups and, in turn, have to power to *create* their own social groups (p. 383). Born also argues that music has transformational power, shaping the way certain music listeners see issues even outside of music, helping to construct so-called “imagined or virtual communities” (p. 381).

Not many scholars have specifically addressed the role of rap and hip hop in the social construction of identity, but Tricia Rose finds that hip hop was instrumental in helping to form the identities of its listeners: “Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience, and one’s attachment to and status in a local group or alternative family” (Rose, 1994, p.34). Some scholars have been interested in how identity is shaped by powerful institutions and actors,

looking at what has come to be known a tradition of identity and power relations. In this tradition, researchers such and Jacob S. Dorman (2011) pointed out that African American identity was unique due to the situation of systemic racism, which in turn influences both developmental processes and experiences of interaction that African Americans encounter. Dorman investigated that theory through his analysis of skin bleaching ads in African American magazines in the 1920s. During the time of the Harlem Renaissance, which encompassed a new sense of pride in being Black, skin bleaching products comprised an overwhelming number of advertisements in Black-focused magazines and newspapers (p. 49). Beyond simple beauty product information, Dorman rather likened the presence of these advertisements to a form of “identity shifting,” (p. 48) in which lighter-skinned African Americans could become “New Negroes” (p. 66), opening themselves up to better job prospects and lives in general by establishing their identities based on the world’s apparent preference for lighter-skinned individuals. The perspective of identity and power relations recognizes that identity is neither the product of a natural development process, nor the product of our own individual efforts and choices, but rather also involves how others view us in relation to existing systems of power.

Because this research is focusing on adults, the developmental approach of psychologists is less relevant than the work related to the social construction of identity and that of identity and power relations. Therefore this study will

examine how individuals make choices and how these choices are shaped in relation to the individual's environment: in this case, in relation to the work environment with its unstated expectations regarding what it means to be a "professional."

## THE CHALLENGES OF ESTABLISHING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

*Thousands of people see her every day and trust every word she says: a television news weathercaster who has enjoyed a successful career as one of the primary faces of her television station. But when the storms and floods end, she retreats to her car for the ride home. It is a ride that always includes a musical companion. Often times those “companions” are rappers Kanye West, the Afrojackets and Drake. Her children are aware of her musical taste, since she often suggests songs for them to download. But she admits that no one in her workplace – or in her viewing audience—would ever guess that she is a fan of rap (even the songs with explicit lyrics). She can already guess their reaction, though: “They would be shocked!” (Anecdotal story taken from informal interview with professional rap fan)*

There has been little research on rap and the professional adult. However, with an aging fan base, writers like John Jurgensen of the Wall Street Journal see rap becoming the new wave of “classic” music as “those teens from the 80’s, now grown up, are giving hip-hop the chance to establish an oldies segment.” (Jurgensen, 2006).

But are those adult hip-hop fans divulging their taste in music to their coworkers, colleagues and managers? As will be shown, the majority of participants in this study (8 out of 10) keep their fondness for explicit rap a secret, worried about how it will affect their standing with colleagues who are presumed

to disapprove of such music. Hence, the question of whether a preference for explicit or gangsta rap music creates a conflict with a person's professional identity.

Professional identity has been defined in a number of ways, from self perception to the construction of self in relation to others. One author looks at the concept simply as how one perceives him or herself as a professional (Ryynänen, 2001, p.i.). Yet, another researcher views professional identity as a concept influenced by factors that extend far beyond the workplace, defining professional identity as "the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role." (Ibarra, 1999, p. 764) Some educational institutions, such as the Goizueta Business School at Emory University, view the establishment of professional identity as being so important that students are required to take a class ("Communications and Professional Development") that will help them establish a professional identity. Leaders in the school place an emphasis on the development of a professional identity because they believe that "if students are unable to create an overarching narrative from their past experiences, they may have trouble planning their careers" (Graves & Epstein, 2011, p.343). The importance of professional identity continues to be stressed beyond the college years, with one study of professional service firms revealing that changes in a worker's professional identity can challenge their overall identity and loyalty to

their own companies (Schilling, Werr, Gand & Sardas, 2012, p. 1231). Both definitions (the simple and complex) aid in explaining how professional identity develops and how it plays a role in overall identity. And because music is a part of the process of self-identification for many, it is also important in relation to how one presents one's professional identity.

Defining oneself as a professional can begin with the profession in question. Leadership and caregiver positions such as police officers and medical doctors often carry the weight of setting positive examples and living up to social expectations or – as one study participant explained- ‘step up’ into a more responsible and adult role (Weaver, Peters, Koch & Wilson, 2011, p. 1224). Weaver, et al. focused on this process as it relates to medical students whose professional identities were linked to both “professional inclusivity and social exclusivity” (p. 1220). He further explored this topic by cross-referencing it with social identity theory. Social identity theory “assumes people have multiple social identities as they move through different social grouping” (Weaver et al., 1220). Yet Weaver believes that the changing identities also compete with a self-imposed separation, best explained through self-categorization theory, which causes people to prefer to identify with a group rather than as individuals. Weaver links self-categorization theory to a particular aspect of professional identity, due to the fact that – as the researcher discovered—medical students often separate themselves from other graduate students in an effort to strengthen their ties in the



medical community, thereby helping to establish the roots of their professional identity. Because professionals are expected to conform to the group norms of others in their profession, issues of how one relates one's personal life and self-perception to others become an important aspect in the negotiation of professional identities. The research question posed in this thesis asked successful professionals the reasons they feel a connection to gangsta rap, even though their lives are far-removed from the violent, drug-infested images often described in the music. The research will also seek to explore whether professionals feel conflicted by their preference for music that has been classified as derogatory or misogynistic, as they lead otherwise responsible lives.

Having a strong professional identity can have a powerful impact on one's career. For example, Gecas and Burke credit strong professional identities with establishing a person's place in society, based on the perceived meanings attached to the professional aspects of their lives (Gecas & Burke, 1995, p.336-338).

Researchers studying the education field have found that a need exists for professional identities to have personal significance. Such qualities in a professional identities may appear to conflict with the image of the average rap fan. However, some research has linked an appreciation of rap to a stronger professional identity, for example, among teachers (McKeown, 2011).

Teachers can relate to the idea of fulfilling the image associated with their occupations, since they are often seen as taking on a role associated with helping

others and showing them the correct path. However, some suggest that the development of professional identities associated with these professions (and others) would be greatly aided by stepping outside of what is considered normal, traditional or acceptable. High school English Language Arts consultant Brent McKeown (2011) suggests that teachers are able to establish a stronger professional identity by relating more closely to the interests of their students, including their interest in rap music (p. 88). McKeown specifically focuses on the works of Jay-Z, a crack-dealer-turned-rapper-turned-music-executive-turned-business-mogul. Jay-Z, who is also part-owner of the NBA Brooklyn Nets basketball team, is known for controversial rap lyrics. McKeown suggests that studying such lyrics could add another dimension to a teacher's professional identity, thereby benefitting students.

“We have a generation of students who are growing up alienated from great art and culture that we could offer to them in our English classes because we have too often refused to meet our students where they are, a practice that at the least diminishes- and at worst, disrespects entirely- the complexity and depth of our students' knowledge and experience.”

-- Decoding Teacher and Student Identity with Jay-Z , Brent McKeown

The importance of establishing professional identities extends to nearly every occupation. In a 2005 study, Clouder discovered that working and establishing strong relationships in the health care field can, in turn, make students better health care professionals (2005, p. 505). In what is known as the “threshold concept,” students are encouraged to develop a strong professional identity in order to become more effective workers (Clouder, p. 512). Education

is also strongly linked to the development of a professional identity. Researchers have studied the previously-mentioned category of medical students. They have also looked at the development of professional identities among undergraduate students. Trede, Macklin and Bridges (2012) concluded that a student's education is a major factor in the development of professional identity. Recruitment tactics, relationships with superiors and the way a business is run can also play a role in how workers construct their own professional identities (Scholling et al., p. 1231). Many workers are well aware of these expectations before they enter the workplace, which points to the fact that successful, high-achieving professionals in certain occupations anticipate that they shall be expected to behave in a certain manner in order to maintain the credibility and social standing associated with that occupation.

The establishment and maintenance of a strong professional identity can, in turn, create a more successful career. Leaders at Emory University endorse the idea that a person's narrative identity also influences "our concept of ourselves and how we interact with others" (Graves & Epstein, p. 344), thereby creating more desirable professionals who are able to attract a myriad of potential employers.

Conclusions such as Weaver's that medical students' professional identities are based more on external factors such as the expectations associated with persons of their standing, rather than internal factors including their own

personal preferences and recreational interests, run counter to the conclusion of researchers who suggest that the establishment of professional identity is heavily rooted in one's own natural personality, personal preferences and lifetime of experiences. Those factors, some suggest, cannot be ignored in the establishment of a personal identity. And, as this paper is about to explore, personal lives, experiences and personalities may play a role in the establishment of a personal identity without the professional even realizing that those elements are even relevant factors in establishing who he or she is in the workplace—and beyond.

Can personal and professional identity exist independent of one another?

As will be revealed in interviews, some gangsta rap fans who are working professionals believe that they can keep aspects of their personal lives “hidden” from their professional colleagues. For example a human resources manager responsible for hiring operations in a major company— who listens to gangsta rap daily—expressed a desire to be seen as a straight-forward professional by his colleagues. However, some researches would argue it is impossible to completely separate the professional identity from the personal identity. Author Margaret S. Archer explores that concept in *Being human: The problem of agency*. In what she calls the “realist approach to humanity” (Archer, 2000, p.7), Archer details a winding path of the development of social identity, which begins with a person's own self-consciousness. She argues that one's personal experiences, identity and values contribute to the development of a social identity, which cannot exist

without those personal beliefs, etc. The importance of social identity in the development of a professional identity has already been stressed and established through the works of researchers like Weaver, studying the impact of social identity on the professional development of medical students. Slay takes the notion of establishing an identity based solely on professional expectations a step further by suggesting that “It is impossible in today’s world to imagine one’s career without incorporating one’s social context into it” (Slay, 2011, p.98). The importance of social identity in the development of a professional identity has already been stressed and established through the works of researchers like Weaver, studying the impact of social identity on the professional development of medical students.

Those social and personal values are also contributing factors in the professional careers that are chosen. In his study of those seeking to obtain their Masters Degree in Social Work, Philip Osteen establishes the following:

“Personal values formed the foundation on which their (students’) decision to enter a MSW program was based. Value conflicts were a common occurrence and illustrate the importance of personal values as well as the role of social work education in establishing a professional value system. Given the centrality of values in the formation of both personal and professional identities, the resolution of this conflict played a central role in identity integration” (Osteen, p. 429).

Perceived conflicting personal and professional values could be a reason why some completely separate personal and professional identities. For some, the prospect of a successful career could be jeopardized by the failure to construct an

appropriate personal identity according to the profession's group norms (Arthur, 2008, p. 169). Personal traits such as race and socioeconomic status can act as a disadvantage for some as "stigmatized persons are often accorded little prestige and/or privilege because their identities are tainted" (Slay & Smith p. 85). This also raises the issue of how discrimination is not just about color, but also about cultural practice, which is an aspect of identity. Holly S. Slay and Delmonize A. Smith explore this idea in their analysis of minority journalists who began their careers at time when people of color were a rarity in the field of journalism, as racism and segregation were very much a part of the lives of many African Americans who were being viewed as inferior:

"Thus in a society where stigmatized minority group members have been depicted as non-professionals and persons with limited opportunities or potential, minority individuals may have a restricted view of who they may become professionally." (Slay & Smith p. 88)

Slay and Smith argue the need for possibly stigmatized traits to play an active role in the development of a professional identity, endorsing arguments that "stigmatized persons bring collective representations to situations" (Slay, 101). For some journalists she studied, those stigmatized preconceptions served a good purpose, helping them to use their position to dispel stereotypes about minorities and expose audiences to a diverse array of stories.

But breaking stereotypes in the public eye is an entirely different challenge from breaking stereotypes within one's own mind. For some, establishing a professional identity is a challenge due to the values which conflict

with the powerful status that they seek to attain. Valerie Lester Leyva (2011) explored this challenge in her study of first-generation Latina graduate students, emphasizing that the young women's high educational aspirations often ran counter to the cultural roles for which they had been groomed, which often times included literally grooming the patriarchs of the family by bathing them and even cutting their toenails (Leyva, p. 26). The theme of serving others made it difficult to assert themselves as professionals in the office place as "submission ties Latinas to a model of behavior that results in a surrender of identity and a negation of self" (Leyva, p. 27, 2011). Latina women interviewed described the awkwardness they felt, while trying to be seen as a professional with participants stating:

"It is so hard to own up and let everybody see that you are a professional. Because all of your insecurities come up, because you always are used to seeing them as your superiors." And "I feel guilty for being assertive."  
--Interview participants (via author Valerie Lester Leyva)

The assumption of women taking on a certain identity, based on their maternal instincts is rather wide-reaching. Researchers in the United Kingdom find that stereotyping of African American females, particularly, exist in two forms: 1.) The "Mammy" stereotype of being nurturing, caring and self-sacrificing and 2.) the Sapphire stereotype of being overly aggressive and bossy (Atewologun & Singh, 2010, p. 334). Those non-flattering professional identities also extend to black men, with the research team noting what they perceive to be a general stereotype that black men are expected to be funny, outgoing and athletic.

According to one man interviewed, “In some of my jobs, they’ve expected me to be Will Smith... They expect you to be a bit cool, to be a bit wild”(Atewologun & Singh, p. 340). This thesis will ask participants to examine the assumptions and expectations that may be associated with them by coworkers and supervisors and how those perceptions are affected by being associated with explicit rap music.

Reaching back to the idea of habitus and the “rules” of the workplace, establishing a professional identity can be difficult for marginalized and minority groups who have to *play* be the *rules* established by powerful, (often times) wealthy, White men (Corsun & Costen). Therefore, those marginalized groups would likely be much more reluctant to reveal any type of behavior that would bring that hard-earned professional identity into question especially since Black professionals have to actively promote a positive identity “to counter negative stereotypes” (Atewologun, p.338). Olivia Kyriakidou offers a solution that lies in altering the way certain stigmatized groups are viewed in the workplace: redefinition. “Redefining disadvantage, redefining the profession and redefining the self... becomes a key process in professional identity construction for the professionals who must navigate multiple and competing identities” (Kyriakidou, p. 36). The researcher suggests that those who are struggling with professional identity and their personal self may have to undergo a conscious process of representing themselves in the way that they want to be seen. Such a concept will come into play in this thesis as participants are asked how they reconcile their



preference for gangsta rap with the fact that the genre of music is often associated with negative stereotypes.

The above-mentioned situations can be a powerful influence on the development on one's personal and professional identity, with the assumption that adults process information in a variety of ways, based on their personal values and concepts. Those values may be influenced by a number of factors such as family upbringing or exposure to different cultures, whether or not a person is aware of such a process, since individuals appropriate knowledge and information through a process which is shaped by their own values and subjectivities (Billet, 2006, p. 58). That process also includes experiences which can lead some professionals down a complex path, such as the path that lead one woman to careers in nursing and management before finally settling into her career as a police officer (Campbell, 2012, p. 80). Those values can also include ones instilled by family members from the time as childhood. Family influences and values have been shown as the heaviest influence on career choice for some professionals such as journalists, with their family's socioeconomic status having a heavy influence on a desire to select a career in which they can help others (Slay & Smith, p. 94). But that socio economic status can also be intertwined with music choice, including gangsta rap's constant chorus of emphasizing certain neighborhoods, cities, states and regions, thereby satisfying "poor young black people's profound need to have their territories acknowledged, recognized and celebrated" (Rose, p. 11). Are

those young (now older, professional) people to ignore what once spoke to them for the sake of their professional identity development?

While a person's race and gender may play a pivotal role in the development of their professional identity, Pfohl (2004) points out that sexuality is also a factor for a number of professionals seeking to establish themselves. Identifying oneself as a heterosexual or homosexual ("sexual identity"), according to her research, can create a stigma that she believes is just as powerful of a stigma as race:

Certain parallels may be drawn between themes within racial and sexual identity development models, including a sense of belonging to a group of people who share a common history or heritage: an effect on how one relates to self and others, within and outside of the collective group; and shared cultural characteristics (Pfohl, p. 145).

While this study does not seek to equate the practice of listening to gangsta rap with that of hiding one's sexual preference, the practice of reconciling two sides of a person's life can be applicable in a number of situations. As one openly-gay author revealed in his memoirs, he knew from an early age that being labeled both a "mama's boy" and a "preacher's son" created an identity conflicted with which he struggled for decades, since he was expected to live the life approved by his strict father, being a heterosexual man who spread the message of Christianity (Jennings, 2007). Pfohl, too, makes comparisons that seem applicable to any type of behavior that may potentially jeopardize one's professional identity, explaining why some persons are reluctant to reveal their

true selves in their professional setting. One of the reasons she references is the fear of “professional repercussions” for those who disclose their sexual orientation (Pfohl, p. 141). Therefore, some professionals engage in “passing... to minimize conflict and discrimination” (Pfohl, p.148). Both reactions can be anticipated by rap fans who feel as though their professional peers or general society looks down on them because of their musical choices. It is a point contemplated by author Tricia Rose, who reflected on a rap concert she attended in the 1990’s. She recalled feelings of resentment and hostility from the venue’s management and security guards. With rap still being a relatively new phenomenon in concert venues, fans who attended the shows were often assumed to be troublemakers. Rose interpreted the stares from the guards as a clear message: “You’re not wanted here, let’s get this over with and send you all back to where you came from” (Rose, p. 127). Perhaps the modern-day professional fears that same reaction if it is discovered that he or she regularly listens to violent, profanity-laced lyrics.

While discussing the topic of professional identity, as it relates to this thesis, one must also consider the social aspects of professional life. Interaction between coworkers in a professional setting can also have social implications that affect the way an individual views himself or herself. Therefore, the concept of social identity will now be discussed and linked to the development of professional identity for gangsta rap fans.

## THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Developed in the 1970s, social identity theory is a “social psychological analysis of the role of self-concept in group membership, group process and intergroup relations” (Hogg, 2006, p.112). In it, people’s self-concept is partially defined by their membership in certain groups (Hogg, p. 111). Those groups can include coworkers in a professional setting. However, membership in certain groups outside of the office can also have an impact on how a person is seen in the office, as social identity theory also explores phenomena including “prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, intergroup conflict,” (Hogg, p. 112). For minorities in a professional setting, the potential for discrimination can be multi-faceted, as underlined by the concept of intersectionality, which predicts multiple forms of oppression (Anderson & McCormack, 2010, p. 951) for African Americans whose layers of identity may not fit in with social norms.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is largely credited with developing the term and concept of intersectionality (Anderson & McCormack, p. 951), focusing much of her research on African American women. That group is an example of the one which Crenshaw believes could be victimized by multiple forms of discrimination because of their race and gender. “If you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both,” she explained in a 2004 interview (Crenshaw & Thomas). As will be revealed by interview participants, that intersectionality can lead to multiple layers of discrimination for African

American men as well, with their race, gender and musical choices resulting in the potential for them to be feared more than female African American gangsta rap fans would be.

Life experiences, including those determined by one's race and socioeconomic position, shape identities and understandings of social constructs (Norris, 2012, p. 451). The experiences of African American youth who feel as though gangsta rap speaks to them can be included in this identity-shaping. For participants in this study, the rap music fan is one of many layers that are still evident, even in a professional setting.

When professional and social groups intertwine, the result is intergroup behavior (Tajfel, 1982, pg. 2). The groups can share commonalities or be altogether different. Groups that do not share commonalities can prove to be a challenge when it comes to intergroup interactions. Such a scenario creates dilemmas particularly as they relate to race (Carr, Dweck & Pauker, 2012, p. 467). Race has proven itself to be a driving factor in the creation of identity (Nkomo, 1992, p.488). At the same time, race may also act as a barrier to intergroup behavior. As was revealed by Carr, Dweck and Pauker, "Interactions with members of different races are still avoided and awkward for many White Americans" (2012, p.452). That point is of particular importance, when one considers the thought that White Americans often hold positions of power in many office settings and "the majority of the powerful in America have White

maleness in common” (Corsun & Costen, 2001, p. 16). That notion does not just lend itself to an explanation of the formation of particular groups. As will now be discussed, it may also explain why those who are grouped together as gangsta rap fans may be placed at a disadvantage while trying to establish their professional identities, as the preference for gangsta rap can be seen as a negative form of cultural capital.

“Cultural competence” is noted as being important both academically and psychologically, as analyzed by editor Randal Johnson alongside the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1993, p. 24). Thus, cultural capital (or lack thereof) can be an advantage (or a detriment). While knowing lyrics to a gangsta rap song can be seen as valuable social capital amongst groups of gangsta rap fans, that same knowledge can be detrimental in a different group setting. Corsun and Costen draw on Bourdieu’s studies of so-called actors in their respective fields, which are seen as “semiautonomous networks of social relations and structured systems that are hierarchically distributed based on types of capital” (Corsun & Costen, p. 17, drawing on the work of Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, and Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998). Social intergroup relations that form among professional peers may focus on workplace happenings or sporting events, neither of which shares the level of controversy and criticism associated with explicit rap. Thus, being a part of a group that embraces gangsta rap can have a negative effect on a person’s

chances of being accepted into a professional intergroup dynamic, as noted by

Tajfel:

“In many cases the effects of group membership on intergroup behavior can hardly be considered without simultaneously taking into account the nature of the relations between the individuals’ membership group and other groups which are interdependent with it.” (Tajfel, p.3)

Tajfel goes on to note that members of particular groups are often emotionally connected to their groups (p. 2). With gangsta rap fans being considered as members of a cultural group that may have a unique understanding of controversial music, Tajfel’s notation could explain the loyalty that gangsta rap fans feel to their group and genre, even in settings where the music may be considered unprofessional. Gangsta rap fans form their own social groups, keeping their musical preferences to themselves (when outside the group). But hiding one’s love for the controversial form of music in a professional setting is not just a choice, it could be a necessity, due to the “consequences that an individual experiences due to his or her membership in a given social group” (Doise, 1988, p.100).

Referring back to Bourdieu's notion of a worker in an office setting being a player on a field in a game, Corsun & Costen explore the concept of habitus or “the disposition of a player, his or her underlying grasp or feel for the game” (p. 18). The field and the rules, however, are set and determined by people who may be very different from the employees (or *players*), causing those employees to adjust their own personal social behavior in professional settings believing that

“To be successful in business... minorities must play by the rules and within the boundaries established by White men” (Corsun & Costen, p. 18). As White men set the rules of the professional “game,” their limited interaction with other groups may cause them to avoid interactions with those groups due to prejudices of which those White male bosses may or may not be aware (Carr, Dweck & Parker, p. 453). Worry over those prejudices may weigh heavily on workers who view themselves as part of social groups which may not fit in well in a professional setting. Whereas what is deemed as *appropriate* workplace behavior may feel comfortable and natural to those who establish the rules of the game (i.e. White men), the same type of behavior may not come naturally to, for example, an African American professional who grew up in an urban environment listening to gangsta rap. Therefore, those players may find it necessary to change their professional and social interactions in order to fit in and achieve professional success (Corsun & Costen, p. 18).

Relating back to the concept of intersectionality, the multiple layers of a minority’s identity can put him or her at risk of being discriminated against or singled out for any one of those layers, as discovered by Anderson and McCormack, who focused their studies on the “modes of oppression” of African American gay male athletes who “find themselves rejected not only by the wider racist and homophobic culture, but they may also be marginalized in their own racial and sexual communities” (p. 954). African American gangsta rap fans in



this study face the same risk of multiple forms of potential backlash from coworkers who are prejudiced and from those who do not approve of gangsta rap as an appropriate musical choice (no matter their race). Therefore, those same fans may choose to censor their listening behaviors, in order to fit in with their professional colleagues. Such behavior can be considered a version of panopticon, principle made popular by Michel Foucault (1977). In this principal, Foucault examines how the presumption of being watched can cause a person to change his or her behavior. In an analysis of Foucault's work, Sears and Godderis note: "Foucault also argued that this model of discipline and surveillance was pervasive and was used in other institutions," to include various workplaces (2011, p. 183). The theory could explain the practice of gangsta rap fans in this study who censor their own behavior in order to meet societal expectations of white collar professionals and not gain negative attention from their workplace colleagues. Gangsta rap fans who presume that they are being monitored by those who view the genre in a negative light automatically censor their own behavior in order to counteract the anticipated negative reaction from their colleagues.

Even though their social identities are key to their lives, gangsta rap fans must also acknowledge that "individuals do not live by social identity alone" (Doise, p. 102). The importance of establishing a strong professional identity can weigh heavily on a person who feels as though their social and personal interactions are contrary to what is thought to be professional (Tajfel, p.5). As

outlined in the following section, the larger social context of contemporary culture frames gangsta rap as a negative phenomenon. With that in mind, the following section will examine the conflict that arises between the successful professional... and their *inner gangster*.

## CONFLICTING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Critics of gangsta rap have gone so far as to call it hateful (Johnson, 1996), proclaiming that it glorifies misogyny, criminal lifestyles and violence (Reyna & Brandt, 2009, p. 362). Some do so while categorizing songs and artists into a “conscious rap” or “unconscious rap” category, stating that the unconscious rap (which includes gangsta rap and explicit rap) promotes negative images (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011, p. 61). Some critics view rap in such a negative way that they even blame it for changing other cultures (outside of the United States) for the worse, including one such case in which rap is accused in the “corruption” of South African culture and language, due to the unedited, uncensored lyrics, which have become popular among South African youth (Khan, 2007, p. 5).

The negative images of gangsta rap, critics say, are all-too-often focused on women portrayed in what have been labeled as misogynistic lyrics. Those lyrics are said to be internalized by young people and rap listeners, in general, causing them to subliminally accept stereotypes such as the previously-mentioned “Sapphire.” But, instead of being a bossy, sassy figure in African American tales, she is now the “bitch” so-often spoken of in rap songs (Adams & Fuller, p. 945). As previously-mentioned research revealed, professional African American women seek to distance themselves from such a stereotypical image; therefore the

revelation of listening to rap music that promotes such ideology has the potential to be seen as an element that can damage one's professional identity.

The fact that there are professional adults who listen to and purchase gangsta rap, while surprising, may be better understood through Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical lens of the field of cultural production. Bourdieu refers to art as an example, saying "the meaning of a work... changes automatically with each change in the field which it is situated for the spectator or the reader" (p. 30-31). Much in the way that the meaning of art can be interpreted differently, depending on its setting, a person can be perceived differently as he or she takes on various personas while navigating the professional world. Steven Yao refers to such a practice, in describing the concept of "hybridity and its significance to Asian American cultural expression, noting that it could refer to:

"instances when elements or features of different traditions come into contact in such a way as to generate new possibilities of meaning in one or other of the contributing cultures, while still accurately depicting the unique particularity of both." (Yao, 2003, p. 363)

Some gangsta rap fans in this study hope to achieve a hybridity between their professional and personal lives, hoping for mutually-beneficial results. However, the actual outcome for most of the participants in this study is that their personalities have to shift, altogether, as they switch *fields* between their personal and professional lives, in order to preserve their professional images.

Fears that a love of rap music could prove damaging to one's professional career have been the subject of review by researchers who have shown that attitudes towards rap music are related to perceptions about the responsibility level of the listener, particularly if that listener is Black (Reyna & Brandt, p. 367). The data also suggest that anti-rap attitudes are associated with discrimination against African Americans, stereotypes depicting blacks as lazy and undeserving of governmental financial assistance (Reyna & Brandt, p.374). But those in need of financial assistance aren't the only ones who are harmed by a negative viewpoint of rap. Researchers paralleling attitudes towards rap with attitudes towards high-achieving African Americans discovered that even a person with a professional image can be harmed by negative viewpoints towards rap music. Such findings are examples of the intersectionality that African American rap fans (even those who are successful professionals) fear, when it comes to negative reactions and discrimination in professional settings. Reyna and Brandt (2009) sought to answer the question of whether listening to rap music affects the way a person, particularly an African American, is viewed. Their research reiterates a focal point of this thesis' exploration of professional identity, particularly the angst that many gangsta rap fans experience at the prospect of their preference for genre being discovered by their coworkers. Reyna and Brandt found that persons who do not approve of gangsta rap are more likely to have a negative and stereotypical view of the people who do listen to the music, viewing gangsta rap listeners as less responsible (Reyna & Brandt, p. 366):

“The negative images associated with rap also seem to have a contaminating effect on the Black community in that even Blacks who are successful and are working hard receive less support... Anti-rap attitudes were associated with opposition to affirmative action efforts even when it comes to recruiting Blacks who were described as educated and qualified.” (Reyna & Brandt, p. 375)

The point made in that research is a key question in this thesis, as interviewees are asked to take the position of a non-rap fan and describe how they believe critics of gangsta rap view explicit rap fans. As will be revealed, a number of rap fans believe that there are very negative stereotypes associated with anyone who would choose to listen to such music.

With controversy and potentially negative consequences facing modern-day gangsta rap fans, their musical choice may be viewed as much more than entertainment. In the end, their choice in music could be factor in judgments made about them and their level of professionalism and responsibility. This research will explore the question of how explicit rap fans reconcile their professional images with their often-criticized preferred genre of music. As will be discussed, some professionals find a solution in not revealing their fondness for gangsta rap to professional colleagues, for fear of being judged negatively; however not every fan of explicit rap music feels the need to immediately hide their choice in music. But potential professional and cultural conflicts can eventually cause them to hide their true selves. It may also cause them to be pleasantly surprised upon discovering the same dilemma amongst some of their coworkers and colleagues. The research will further discuss how successful white-collar professionals who

are also gangsta rap fans negotiate between the perceived cultural clashes that result from their preference for a genre of music that has stirred up controversy since its inception.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on personal, detailed interviews with a relatively small group of a particular population in an area of study that has not been greatly explored. This body of work will be identified as a case study, keeping in line with the perception of a case study as being used “in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomenon” (Yin, 2008, p.4). As a qualitative research study, (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010), the research is not meant to provide an overall analysis that is applicable to an entire population. It is merely meant to explore the experiences of coming-of-age gangsta rap fans and, thus, begin a conversation that is worthy of further research. The researcher developed interest in this topic during a qualitative research class that featured the works of Lindlorf & Taylor on developing a qualitative study. The researcher noted that qualitative researchers have the ability to use their studies, often times in ethnographic settings, to diversify fields of research and reflect previously-unheard voices (Lindlorf & Taylor, 2010, p.15). Such a notion caused the researcher to tap into the contrast between her musical tastes and her public image. As a successful professional, she became interested in exploring the predicament that can be developed in the lives



of gangsta rap fans whose choice in music may conflict with their professional identities.

This study took place between March 2012 and April 2013. The researcher employed qualitative research methods to explore how professionals who are fans of gangsta rap negotiate and justify their taste preferences for rap, as these preferences are at odds with the cultural expectation that rap is not an appropriate genre for maturing professionals. Interviews were conducted in order to decipher the ways in which people are explaining (or hiding) their commitment and loyalty to rap music, as they assume that others in their professional lives may view that music as offensive.

The interview guide sought to explore the extent to which professionals who are rap fans believed that they were expected to “grow out” of their particular musical preferences behavior, much in the way that heavy metal fans were expected to grow out of their preferred form of music (Freeman, 1985). Fans who were among the first generation to grow up with rap as an ever-present music option may feel as though they are on the receiving end of that same expectation. Being among the above-mentioned generation of rap music fans, the researcher utilized her personal contacts with various individuals and organizations in order to develop a pool of potential interviewees. Criterion sampling was necessary, since only persons who met certain criteria proved to be viable potential interviewees (Creswell, 2012, p.156). Appropriate were people who were born

within ten years of the successful debut of the country's first top-selling rap single, "Rapper's Delight," which debuted on the charts in 1979. Thus, eligible participants were between the ages of 24 and 44. This age requirement was necessary, because it indicated that participants were no older than ten years old at the time of the debut of "Rapper's Delight." Being able to listen to rap music from an early age would mean that rap was a part of the participants' lives from an early stage. That stage may also be one in which participants began developing musical preferences. Furthermore, the perspective of a person who is older than their 20s also carries the potential of lending a credible, professional voice to the acceptance of rap among middle-aged adults. Further criteria for participation in the study included participants being college-educated, successful, working professionals; those elements go against the traditional stereotypes of rap music listeners as being violent and uneducated. As previously noted, the term "professional" will be in reference to those in white-collar jobs, often times in managerial and entrepreneurial positions which may give the subjects a higher-profile status in their communities.

The criterion sampling was paired with snowball sampling, because the researcher asked for references regarding other potential participants who met the criteria and were interested in the study, thus creating a larger field of potential interviewees (Atkison & Flint, 2001, p.2). Originally in search of a maximum of 20 participants, the researcher tailored the sample to ten participants, after being

lead to interviewees who encompassed a wide range of perspectives. Some of these participants were personal friends of the researcher, which contributed to the ability of the researcher to gather deeply contextualized stories.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were contacted by the researcher on an individual basis and asked to participate in the interview based on personal acquaintance or on a recommendation from someone within the sample. At the time of initial contact, which is used to gauge a potential participant's interest in being interviewed, the researcher conducted a pre-interview. The pre-interview ensured that the interviewee met basic research requirements related to age and the term "professional" (as it is being defined in this study). The pre-interview also provided an opportunity to gather "off the cuff" anecdotal stories of the interviewee's experiences with gangsta rap. Such anecdotes have been used within the body of research.

Being a part of the generation exposed to explicit rap at its onset, the researcher's experience also played a vital role. As was noted in the introduction of this study, the researcher first began listening to explicit rap music in her early teen years. Despite her family's improved social and economic status through the years (moving from the inner city neighborhood to an all-White upper-middle-class suburb; and going from public school to private school), she remained loyal to her favorite gangsta rappers, who often spoke of struggles that were still happening in her old neighborhood. Those strong connections to the stories

behind the music, coupled with the researchers' desire to experience and understand the different emotions communicated in the songs, lead her to continue to listen to gangsta rap, even after becoming a successful professional in the high-profile field of media communications. The researcher's affiliations with persons who spent pivotal years listening to explicit rap lyrics and still engage in the practice allowed for personable conversations with those colleagues. Being able to engage in friendly banter about a 1990s-era song or rap group created opportunities for naturally-flowing interviews. Such a dynamic helped to ensure a detailed, comfortable exchange of information during the interview process. With perceived apprehension of revealing their potentially-controversial music choices, some participants felt more comfortable revealing their practices to someone with whom they are not familiar. The sought-after data can sometimes be better obtained when a relationship of trust exists. Blind, anonymous computer surveys are not fully able to capture such nuances.

Once selected, participants' interviews were conducted at a place of the participant's choosing in order to ensure the comfort of the participant. There was no payment for participation. Interviews were conducted by the primary researcher and audio recorded in order to ensure that quotes are stated correctly in the study. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms. They do not know the specific pseudonyms assigned to them. Doing so helps to ensure that participants are not able to identify themselves, and become identifiable by others. Such an

action helps to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Once gathered, the interviews were logged and analyzed. The researcher looked for instances in which people expressed a conflict between professional identity and their taste in music. The researcher also analyzed stories of interviewees who would or would not reveal their preference for gangsta rap. Personal connections with rap music were examined and paralleled with the comfort level that fans have in revealing their musical tastes to colleagues. The issue of gender came into play in the analysis of interviewees' reluctance to discuss their fondness of explicit rap. The most powerful connection established was a reluctance to reveal a fandom of gangsta rap with a fear of stereotyping and circumscription of carefully-constructed professional identities.

The concept of professional identity will be used as a framework in order to analyze personal information provided by participants, giving an insight into how rap music is fit into their lives, even if the fit is thought of as unconventional. Interview information on how participants construct their own professional identity will be analyzed in relation to literature on the process and importance of establishing strong professional identities. That process will then be compared to the perceived disruption to one's personal identity if it were to be revealed that he or she was a fan of gangsta rap.

## GROWING UP WITH GANGSTA RAP

While music is something the average person is likely to hear on a daily basis, certain musical encounters may stand out more than others. Such was the case when fans of gangsta rap were asked to recall their first time hearing rap music with explicit lyrics. Most of the participants told very vivid stories, recalling the place they were, the people they were with, the name of the song and even reciting the lyrics. Decades after their first listening experience, their memories of gangsta rap are still very vivid.

Perhaps the most vividly-illustrated memory is that of a young professional who recalls being a small child when hearing explicit rap for the first time. Keith is a 26-year-old African American man who works as a human resources partner for a major chemical company earning a salary of up to \$80,000 a year. As a partner, he is responsible for hiring new employees and managing employee relations. Keith holds a bachelor's degree in marketing and a master's degree in business administration. Prior to his position as a human resources partner, he acted as a marketing representative for a major cellular phone company, serving as the "face" of the brand in cities across the country. And, through all of his travels and professional accomplishments, gangsta rap has maintained its place as an important part of his life.

Keith recalled being only "five or six" years old, when he took the liberty of borrowing a cassette tape from an older sibling. "I had a Fisher Price cassette tape with the microphone attached," he said while laughing at the memory. "And

I got this (tape) from my brother or sister... the guy was saying “Cruzin’ down the street; real slow; what the fuck they be yelling? Marrero! (laugh) That’s my earliest encounter with rap.” Keith describes the moment as his “most vivid memory,” as his Fisher Price stereo blared out lyrics laced with profanity.

The song lead Keith to want to discover other explicit rap artists, including Tupac Shakur. He recalls, as an adolescent, listening to Shakur’s album entitled “All Eyez on Me” and connecting with one particular song. “There was a song on it called ‘Shorty Wanna be a Thug,’” Keith said with a smile. “And I loved listening to the song! My mama would not want me to listen to it. So I begged and begged. And she finally let my brother record it on a CD from a tape and when the cursing part came on, he just hit the mute button.” From there, Keith’s appreciation for explicit rap grew, with his very first encounter as a kindergartner with a Fisher Price Cassette player beginning the musical journey. Keith even said that the memory stayed in his mind so vividly, that when a college roommate played the song more than a decade later, Keith felt an instant sense of elation connected to his childhood memory. “My neighbor in college was blaring (the song),” he said. “And I said ‘man where did you get that from?!’” The moment lead Keith to do some research and finally discover that his once-favorite song was created by a little-known rapper out of New Orleans for whom that particular song would be his only hit record. But for Keith who vividly recalls his little fingers pressing the “play” button on the Fisher Price cassette player, the impression of his first encounter with gangsta rap is lasting.

Elementary school encounters with profanity-laced, misogynistic lyrics were not uncommon among the people interviewed in this research. Blanca, a 27-year-old Hispanic entrepreneur also recalls liking explicit rap from an early age. “My first time hearing gangsta rap was Snoop and Dr. Dre, when I was about 7 or 8 years old,” said Blanca, referring to the song Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang, featured on the 1992 album *The Chronic*, by Dr. Dre. Blanca says that she, by far, was not the only kid who had discovered the mature lyrics far before adulthood. “Me and my friends used to sing it on the playground,” she said, recalling that the language she heard in the music was not different from what she heard every day in her own neighborhood. Blanca recalls some of the playground favorites were rappers Dr. Dre, Domino, Warren G. and Too \$hort, all of whom had albums adorned with stickers warning parents of the explicit content. However, neither of Blanca’s parents or adult family members ever stepped in to reinforce that warning. “Nobody ever said anything,” she recalled. “They never did!” It is a drastically different story from Keith. His upbringing in a well-to-do two-parent home was part of his mother’s refusal to let him listen to the uncensored versions of explicit rap songs. Blanca, on the other hand, had less supervision as the child of a single mother who was often left her child in the care of neighbors, friends and family members. The music that Blanca heard grew to become the music that she identified as a significant part of her childhood. “I grew up on West Coast hip hop,” she said, referring to artists such as Dr. Dre and Warren G whose California



roots and style helped to define West Coast hip hop. And, in the opinion of listeners like Blanca, those artists helped to define a generation.

Growing up in a rough neighborhood, too, Eva recalls being in her early middle-school years when she encountered her first gangsta rap song. Songs by an explicit rapper by the name of Scarface were ones that she first sought out. “You would hear it at a friend’s house and say ‘Hey, can I borrow that tape?’ Just because you wanted to kinda hear the music and lyrics.” Eva found herself pressing rewind on her cassette tape recorder over and over, trying to memorize every single lyric and “get a feel for what they were saying and what it meant.” Eva was drawn in by the fact that the music that she was hearing reflected the issues and actions taking place in her community. She had already seen illegal behavior such as robbery and drug dealing in her own neighborhood.

Not every fan of explicit rap in this study began listening to the genre as a small child or even embraced the genre immediately. James, a 38-year-old middle school administrator, recalls being in his early teen years, when a school mate gave him a cassette tape by rapper Too \$hort and strongly encouraged him to listen to it:

*“It just started off with cursing. And the first thing he said was the B-word. And I recall hitting the pause button like ‘Oh my God. He just cursed!’ Like I’m not supposed to be listening to it. And I took it out and I didn’t listen to it for a week. And then I hear all of my friends talking about it, like, ‘Man, did you listen to that Too \$hort?’ So I finally put it in again. And the cursing unnerved me, but I liked the beat. And I like the groove. And I continued to listen to it.”*

Unlike Eva, who found that the stories and language in rap echoed those of her own experience, James initially found rap “unnerving.” His eventual enjoyment of rap was more personal and therapeutic, as will be discussed in a later section of this thesis. James eventually found that the music spoke to him in a very personal way, and his dedication to gangsta rap continues. But, just as he hesitated in listening to the Too \$hort tape so many years ago, he still hesitates to listen to gangsta rap in certain situations for fear of negative repercussions such as losing the respect of his coworkers.

For some gangsta rap fans, their introduction to the genre was a progression from mainstream radio-friendly rap to its edgier counterpart. Such is the case with interview participant Sasha. In the mid 1980’s when she was a child, radio-friendly artists like Run DMC were in heavy rotation on her cassette player. “I grew up on the west side of Chicago,” said the 31-year-old, referring to her area as being one of the more privileged middle-class African American neighborhoods. Sasha now owns her own media company and serves as the spokesperson for several companies. “I grew up with Run DMC and Fat Boyz. That type of thing, was very prevalent.” Sasha also recalls her taste in music being developed by older cousins and family members who discovered rap music before she did. “I remember being 4 or 5 and going to the (rap-themed) movie *Krush Groove* because my cousin, who isn’t that much older than me-- but old enough to babysit-- really wanted to see the movie,” said Sasha. “So she took me to a matinee after ballet practice on a Saturday afternoon.”

After going from ballet to beat-boxing (a style used in rap music), Sasha began wanting to know more about other forms of rap, particularly explicit rap. It wasn't long before she discovered rap artists who told graphic tales of their gangster pasts. "I remember Easy-E," she said, recalling the west-coast rapper whose group, N.W.A. was among the first to cause controversy with extremely violent lyrics. Unlike Blanca, Sasha knew that her parents would disapprove of the music. Yet she would find places to listen to the genre, anyway: "I would go home and watch *The Cosby Show*. And then if I was at my cousin's house, I would watch *Yo! MTV Raps*." Telling such a story demonstrates the fact that, even in her childhood, Sasha was aware that some forms of musical expression were more acceptable than others in popular culture. It is an interesting precursor to the later practices that she and other rap listeners admit to engaging in by making distinctions in appropriate professional behavior, which includes their music choices.

Like Sasha, 37-year-old nursing director Lynda did not discover explicit rap in her early childhood. Lynda grew up in Germany as the daughter of parents who were originally from Bosnia. Her musical taste was very diverse, being exposed to musical genres that were popular throughout Europe. But there was one place thought to be the authority on determining what type of music was in style. "Everything is bigger, different and better in the United States. And overseas, you want to have that life," she said. Part of that "life" was the music. And by the time Lynda was 13 years old, she recalled that explicit rap music had

begun to gain popularity in Europe, after taking off in the United States. She immediately became a fan of Tupac Shakur and Busta Rhymes, enjoying not just the beats but also the cadence. “It was fast! You gotta catch it,” she said, recalling how her European friends would often try to repeat the lyrics of a variety of hard core rap songs. But oftentimes, they didn’t realize – or care about—what the rappers were saying. “First you don’t pay attention to the words. I’m not American. You just listen to the vibe and you go with it. Not understanding what the meaning is behind. It just sounds cool, because you listen to the sounds,” said Lynda. As will be discussed later, her fondness for the vibe of explicit rap music continued, even after she discovered the meaning behind the lyrics. Even as a teen who did not get the full meaning of the lyrics, though, Lynda says that rap music did play a role in her life. Just the social association with explicit rap from the U.S. served to open her mind to a world that was opposite from her own.

Several more of the participants recall being teenagers when they heard explicit rap music for the first time. Among them is 35-year-old African American civil engineer and company founder/CEO David. In his adult years, David developed an appreciation for jazz music. But he says that his fondness for explicit rap music has been lasting. David first recalled discovering the genre when he was nearing the end of middle school. “It was N.W.A. (album) *Straight Outta Compton*,” he said. He found out about the album through another middle school friend who suggested that David listen to the cassette tape. Even though the lyrics included tales of robbery and violence, David recalls not having an

immediate negative reaction. “It was the same language we used every day,” he said, speaking of his interactions with peers in his working-class neighborhood. His initial reaction was much the same as Blanca’s, as neither grew up living privileged lifestyles.

The teen years brought explicit music into the life of another rap fan. Thirty-three-year-old Noel, holds two master’s degrees in biology and science and has worked in a management for a federally-operated health organization. She is now an executive director for a state board agency. Noel, who has both Caucasian and African American heritage, recalls not paying very much attention to rap music until about the age of 16. She had largely been a fan of R&B and contemporary country music. But, in her high school years, her then-boyfriend introduced her to explicit rap music. “It was a number of songs that he let me listen to. But what stood out was probably “Hit ‘Em Up.” The 1996 song, by Tupac Shakur is graphic from the very beginning.

*First of all, fuck your bitch and the clique you came.  
Westside, when we ride, come equipped with game.  
You claim to be a player, but I fucked your wife.  
We bust on bad boys, nigga, fuck for life.*  
“Hit ‘Em Up,” Tupac Shakur.

But the graphic lyrics did not deter the girl who had, before the age of 16, spent her time listening to far less-controversial forms of music. “I like that song a lot! That’s probably my earliest memory,” Noel said while smiling. When asked specifically about the profane lyrics, she noted: “I thought it was very cool,” Noel stated, noting that she had previously not been exposed to such raw lyrics, as a

studious, fairly sheltered middle child in a two-parent middle class home. Noel also notes that the song and all of its explicit lyrics, began her interest in the rapper. “I started to become a fan of Tupac, so I started to follow his music.” She sought meaning behind the songs, such as “Girlfriend,” which first seems like a ballad to a young woman. But, further delving into the song, Noel discovered that when Tupac spoke of his “girlfriend,” he was really speaking of his gun. Her fondness of Shakur’s music continues to this day, even 17 years after the rapper’s death.

So far, the participants in this study have connected their earliest memories of explicit rap to their elementary school, middle school and high school years. However, those who were on the cusp of adulthood at the development of gangsta rap also played a role in its popularity as they embraced the music as part of their own lives. One such fan is 42-year-old Alicia. Growing up in Brooklyn, her Afro-Latino roots (with family from Panama) exposed her to a variety of music, including early rap developing out of the Bronx in New York. However, Alicia did not begin to pay attention to the happenings in the gangsta rap genre until her college years. As Alicia was working on the first of her two master’s degrees on her way to becoming a college professor, she found an unlikely “partner” in her studies. “My album of choice was Snoop Dogg’s first album, ‘Doggy Style.’ Yeah! And that got me through paper-writing and all-nighters and all that kind of stuff,” Alicia said, referring to the 1993 album, which features on the cover a woman on her hands and knees with her derri  re sticking

out of a dog house. It was an image that, at the time, wasn't offensive enough to keep Alicia from enjoying the songs on the album. "They are certainly (songs) I would dance to at the party. And even now on some songs that I may come across or listen to, I'm like this was pervasively sexist and masculine and machismo and in every way was derogatory to me and women in general. But I enjoyed the beat. I enjoyed his creative style, in terms of how he rapped," she said, acknowledging that she dismissed the negative lyrics. The catchy beats and creative style from Alicia's first interaction with gangsta rap were enough to maintain her interest in the genre, even as she progressed into her current career as a university professor who often debates the topic of gangsta rap with her own students.

From their very first encounters with gangsta rap, fans from the genre seemed to realize that negotiation would be necessary in order to maintain a relationship with the genre. For Keith and Sasha, those negotiations included figuring out how to be able to listen to the explicit songs of their choosing without offending their parents. Their decisions led them to either censor the content or hide the fact that they were listening to it at all, much in the way that Foucault theorized through his idea of panopticon that individuals will censor themselves when they feel as though their behavior is not appropriate for a given setting or group of people (1977). For others, like Lynda and Alicia, the decision to ignore the lyrics and focus on the beat allowed them to continue to listen to gangsta rap. Yet there are also fans like Blanca and David who chose to live their lives as gangsta rap fans out in the open, as children whose neighborhoods had already

exposed them to the ills being discussed in explicit rap songs. Their behavior brings to mind a personal example of intersectionality brought about by Beverly Greene, who recalls not being offended by being called “Negro,” because her understanding of that word was shaped by the people around her, who did not look at it in a negative light (2010, p. 454). The intersectionality of gangsta rap listeners with their upbringing in inner-city neighborhoods made them less likely to hide their fondness of the music during their adolescent years. But negotiation tactics are known to change for participants in this study, who later reveal their reluctance to reveal their musical preference, instead choosing to censor their behavior while in professional company.



## HOW GANGSTA RAP FANS CONNECT WITH THE MUSIC

The previous section illustrated the fact that, the primary interactions that gangsta rap fans have with the genre of music can have a lasting impact. That impact can range from their devotion to the music to the way that they view themselves or the way that they feel others view them. All of the above-mentioned potential connections with gangsta rap will be explored as participants reveal what they feel are their connections to explicit rap music.

While the initial interactions of young people with gangsta rap are important, they are not the only factors is the development of their preference for the musical genre. It can be assumed that some people who heard gangsta rap for the first time did *not* like it and, therefore, did not continue to listen to it. The music had to have connected with the participants in this study in a significant way, in order to maintain their attention and cause them to go in search of other explicit rap music and rap artists. This section explores the connection participants initially experienced with gangsta rap and still may experience today. That connection can be a valid explanation as to why their devotion to gangsta rap continues, despite their status as well-respected, responsible, successful professionals. Part of the reason people may connect to other gangsta rap fans is the sense that they all share an understanding communicated by the messages in the music due to their associations within their communities as part of their upbringings.

James, the 38-year-old middle school administrator who recalled hearing gangsta rap for the first time at the urging of a friend, noted that his preference for the songs did not develop immediately (as will be discussed in the next section of this paper). Still, James felt an almost subliminal pull towards the lyrics and the rhythms. “It was my form of music. It was something I can adapt to. I can relate to.” James grew up in a two-parent home in a working-class neighborhood. When listening to explicit rap artists such as Too \$hort, he felt as though part of his own life and feelings were being expressed through the raw lyrics. “They were talking about things we were talking about at school,” he said “It wasn’t what was on the radio. The radio was very clean R&B, you mom and dad’s music.” James took to claiming the music, personally, seeing himself as an “insider” on a form of music that he felt like would not be embraced by society. “This was something that was different. It was not on the radio. And it could have been the rebellious streak (in me) as well. It was something that would not be on the radio. Something you wouldn’t want on the radio. So it wasn’t gonna be commercialized, so we thought. It was going to be ours because it was so raw and no one else would have gotten it.” The “insiders” who understood the music could have also considered themselves to be rebels, according to James. “That’s what the whole thing it (was) rebellious. And if I could fast forward to any rap act, N.W.A was the quintessential rebellious rap group,” he said. James felt as though the music belonged to him, on a personal level; therefore, making rap listening to explicit rap music a personal experience.

The music became very personalized to James who recalls some rappers having powers similar to mind readers, expressing exactly what teens like James were feeling... and then sharing that message of frustration over the airwaves. "Ice Cube, I think was a genius," said James. "The way he would spin lyrics and would say things that you were thinking. You would listen to it and you would say 'yeah!' And his music would make you mad! His lyrics would make you mad against society. Yeah! That's how they treat us." James also recalled feeling as though rappers had the power to publicly say what he and his friends only wished they could express out loud. "The lyrics was that it was raw, unadulterated version of what you think and what you feel," he said. "And it's almost like you live vicariously through them. I would never say 'F the Police' (a song by N.W.A.) over and over. But there are some times where I felt like I wanted to say this," James recalled. He also noted some of the angst he felt in his own neighborhood, expressed on gangsta rap albums. "(the lyrics) 'Dopeman, dopeman, stop pushing on my block.' You can't say it, but you live through them." Fans such as James felt as though rappers who had the microphone commanded the attention of the masses in order to address the problems of the disenfranchised.

Other interviewees said that their connection to explicit rap music was due to its power to manage or change a listener's mood or even their view of their own status in school or their neighborhood. This could happen consciously or sub-consciously. Keith recalled a change in his mood during his first childhood

interactions with rap. “When you’re young, it makes you feel cool,” he said. “It makes you feel hip and older like what all the other kids are doing.” That is a change of which he was very aware. But, years after Keith first discovered rap on his Fisher Price cassette player, he moved away from his hometown and began being exposed to different types of music. That is when he recognized the role that explicit rap played in influencing his mood. “I started listening to different music. And I realized, man, sometimes the real, real gangsta rap stuff—it makes you feel angry,” Keith said. “It changes your mood. For no reason! So I guess, early on, it’s innocent, but then as you get older, you realize that it does influence your mood.” Nevertheless, Keith continues to listen to explicit rap in his adult years. However, he finds himself making a conscious connection to serve the purpose of mood management. “Personally, I feel like sometimes the real, real heavy gangsta rap stuff makes me feel slightly angry and puts me in a different mood, so I get away from it in the mornings,” he said, speaking of his commute to work as a human relations manager for a major chemical company. “I listen to something different. If I have a rough day, I may put it on when I leave (work).” Keith feels as though explicit rap speaks to his frustrations. Therefore, he connects with the music on that level, as do other rap fans who look at the music as a form of therapy. Yet, the mood-management connections that fans of explicit rap experience with the genre are as varied as the fans, themselves. While Keith seeks to avoid feeling angry on his way to work, deeming it an inappropriate way

to begin his workday, other fans look to certain “angry” rap lyrics to incite excitement amongst their peers.

Whitley, a 27-year-old African American college testing center director, counts herself among the group of gangsta rap fans that have had those varying experiences, while still being subject to the mood-managing power of rap music. Listening to explicit rap music since the age of 13, Whitley initially discounted the messages as not being personally relatable to her. She grew up in a two-parent home in an upper-middle class neighborhood in which very few African American families resided. Despite her upbringing, Whitley recalled several instances in which even she was surprised by her reaction to certain rap songs. Instead of the anger experienced by Keith, Whitley said certain explicit songs cause her to feel excitement and elation. She said the same is true for many of her colleagues and former college friends, particularly with fellow members of her sorority, a high-profile organization that counts former civil rights leaders and first ladies among its members. It was not uncommon, though, for Whitley and her sorority peers to listen to rap music in moments of fun and excitements. Whitley says the ladylike behavior for which her friends are publicly known is overrun by jumping and dancing when members who she knows hear one particular song. “When I’m with my sorority sisters and we’re singing all of the lyrics to Li’l Boosie’s “Set it Off.” Anytime that happens, we never fit the description (of a typical gangsta rap fan)... If that song comes on... everybody... we don’t even need the music, we can just rap by ourselves,” Whitley said of the

social bond created by the music. When asked to explain the significance of and meaning behind the song, she stated: “The song is basically about not messing with me, I suppose, because my click—which is the group I hang around—will all get you. They’ll set it off!” Whitley, who is African American, said that she has seen people of all races be filled with the same level of excitement, when listening to the song or to the work of gangsta rap artists affiliated with the song or its creator, rapper Li’l Boosie. She noted overhearing one particular conversation that she thought to be proof of such:

*“In college, I can remember waiting for class and there was a group of White kids-- and I mean, preppy white. The girl had on workout shorts, which is the White girl uniform at my college, with a sorority shirt and pearls. (They were) a group of kids you could very easily stereotype. And the (Caucasian) guy was like ‘Guess who performed yesterday?’ And they were like ‘Who?’ And he was like “Li’l Fat and Mouse !” And they were pissed off because they missed the concert. And these are some rough rappers that you hear at cheap clubs. And for these kids to be mad that they missed that concert—(I) was just like ‘you would’ve gotten jumped anyway!’ (laugh)”*

Whitley told this story in a playful way to make a point. She was not trying to insinuate that young, Caucasian college students should not listen to the music. Instead, she told the story to describe that even she was surprised at the far-reaching ability of explicit rap music to get listeners excited about the songs and the artists. The confidence noted in the songs, by gangsta rap artists like Li’l Fat, Mouse and Li’l Boosie, is enough to make listeners like Whitley (and those young college students) feel confident as well, further describing another

connection that explicit rap makes with its listeners. Anecdotally, the Whitley's story was met with the following exchange:

*Researcher: "Where is Li'l Boosie right now?"*

*Subject: "In somebody's prison."*

Whitley had managed to ignore the fact that the writer of one of her favorite songs was also a convicted felon. Her excitement over Li'l Boosie's music took precedent over the fact that the illicit, criminal behavior that he discussed in his rap really was real... and harmful enough to someone else to cause Li'l Boosie to be sentenced to time in prison. Such an omission on her point harkens back to the idea that some gangsta rap fans see beyond the negative images (and deeds) linked to the music. Instead, their connection is emotional, driven by a rhythm or an interpretation of lyrics, personalized to their own lives, much in the way that participants in the Iwamoto study connected to rap music. Though they had not committed any of the illegal deeds mentioned in the songs, they internalized the expressions of angst and determination in the music, and made the messages very personal, much in the way that a reader would be inspired by a book (Iwamoto et al., p. 349). Such illustrates the point that gangsta rap fans can connect to the music by making their own meanings from the lyrics.

While listeners like Keith and Whitley experienced connections with gangsta rap ranging from anger to elation, Blanca felt that the connection of gangsta rap to her life was more biographical. While the music didn't necessarily alter her mood, it definitely reinforced the ideas and behaviors that she saw

modeled before her, daily. “It made me feel like the times that we were living in because that’s the time when, like, (the movie) “Boys in The Hood” came out and (the movie) “Menace II Society.” Then the neighborhood, the inner city that I grew up in, there was a lot of gang violence. And it was a lot of people in gangs,” she said. The music connected with Blanca as an echo of her everyday life. While others may have perceived explicit rap artists as glorifying violence, Blanca viewed them as street poets in their own right. Similar to James feeling as though rappers were telling the untold stories of his own neighborhood, Blanca felt that gangsta rap communicated stories that mainstream America would, otherwise, never have heard. “I constantly grew up around that (violence),” said Blanca. “So that (gangsta rap) era, it was the music,” she said in a matter-of-fact way. The fact that Blanca chose to listen to a number of West Coast rappers like Warren G was no coincidence. The style portrayed by gangsta rappers with California roots was also the style that she saw daily on her neighborhood streets. “We were getting a lot of California gang members and drug dealers who were coming to Colorado and starting these gangs,” said Blanca. “And so... it went with the music, which went with the movies, which was what was going on in our lives.” Though Blanca said she never, personally, got involved with gangs, she embraced the messages behind the music. Now, as the owner of a hair salon and the Founder and CEO of a hair company, Blanca spends her time in various cities and countries, meeting a diverse group of people. However, she still maintains that the



lyrics in gangsta rap speak to her, especially reminding her of her less-than-ideal childhood.

While the lyrics can feel personal to gangsta rap fans, they are not the reason behind the pull that all fans feel towards the genre. Some respondents in this study felt as though the lyrics were simply an underlying element to the music. The real connection, for them, was the rhythm. David, for example, admitted that he did not have any strong emotional reaction to all explicit rap songs. His reaction is the opposite of listeners like James and Blanca. David said that some of the songs may have spoken to him “at some point” in his life. But, in actuality, he connected with the beat of various gangsta rap songs more than he did with the lyrics or the artists themselves. Those beats, often times as raw and edgy as their accompanying words, were enough to make David feel drawn to the genre. “Just the rhythm,” he explained. “I mean, I’m being for real. If you took that (rhythm) away and just listened to the words, I would have absolutely no interest, no use or whatever, in it.” While some of the participants feel that driven by the emotion and aggression depicted in some gangsta rap songs, David’s opinion speaks to a different reason why some listeners continue to listen to gangsta rap: the power of a good beat to move its listener even if that person does not pay particular attention to the message behind the song.

Alicia, too, had a similar reaction in explaining how she connected to music which she had previously described as “pervasively sexist.” She rationalizes her fondness for the music by focusing on the arrangement of the

music and the accompanying patterns of rhyme (instead of the specific words). Reflecting, again, on her favorite gangsta rap album, Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggy Style*, Alicia recalls her reaction to one particular song. "(The song) 'It's a Doggy Dog World.' There's some sort of old school R&B group singing background on that one," she said. "And I just loved the beat and how they arranged that and everything! (Snoop Doggy Dogg) also reminded me that as a rap artist, he probably heard that (type of music) going on as a kid." The song of which Alicia speaks pays homage to 1970's era R&B and pop culture figures in both the music and the video, using singing group The Dramatics, which gained popularity in the 1970's. Alicia saw the nod to "old school" R&B as a connection that she and Snoop Doggy Dogg shared. "I think that he and I are about the same age," she said. Her connection not only with the beat but also with the personal biography of the rapper has allowed her to be attracted to the music on both a rhythmic and personal level, thus establishing a meaningful connection.

The fact that some fans of gangsta rap immediately found similarities between themselves and the rappers speaks volumes as to why their devotion to the controversial form of music would continue throughout the decades. As some forms of music required specific musical skills, the art of rapping evolved from the streets and, therefore, was seen as accessible to all. This fact was not lost on fans like James, who eventually became a professionally-trained trumpet player. But before he became proficient at playing a brass instruments, he saw the accessibility of turntables and a microphone. "Everybody couldn't afford a music

lesson. Everybody couldn't pick up an instrument like I could," he said. "But anyone had a turntable and they could scratch a little bit." Gangsta rap fans who grew up under less-than-ideal circumstances view the music as somewhat of a great equalizer, giving everyone equal access to the artistic expression of music.

The interviews with gangsta rap fans have revealed the varying levels of connections that they experience with the music. Just as other forms of art can be interpreted in different ways, so can gangsta rap be personalized in different ways. Some gangsta rap fans choose to look at the stories depicted in songs as a reflection of their own lives in a biographical sense. While others may not have seen violent, illegal acts in their neighborhoods first-hand, they can relate to the sense of frustration and powerlessness that gangsta rap songs communicate to the masses. Still, others listeners choose not to connect with the personal hardships. Instead, they choose to focus on the infectious rhythms that cause them to listen to songs without ingesting the words being spoken. Whether considering the words or the music, a number of gangsta rap fans value its use as a mood management tool, with the power to inspire and excite. No matter their reason for listening, the gangsta rap fans in this study must still reconcile with the fact that their professional images do not jibe with the images of gangsta rappers and the songs they create. Therefore, those fans find it necessary to navigate through the different cultural fields, in order to achieve the correct socially-defined professional habitus and make their behavior appropriate for any given situation. In a professional setting in which higher-ranking colleagues are older and come

from suburban, White cultures, the *reason* for listening to gangsta rap may not matter at all. Whether they say they listen for the inspiration or just the beat, white-collar gangsta rap fans say they are still thought of as being too intelligent and responsible to endorse such a type of music that is socially defined in a negative category. Examples of such will be given in the subsequent sections, after the participants, themselves explain why they do not feel that the music is personally offensive.

## WHY FANS DON'T TAKE OFFENSE

As explored in the literature review in this thesis, one of the primary criticisms of gangsta rap is that its lyrics are derogatory and offensive. Nothing is off-limits to rappers who claim freedom of speech as their defense for telling the raw, real stories of their lives. And no group is immune from being a target. Ice T. takes aim at police officers in his song “Cop Killer”:

*I got my brain on hype.  
Tonight'll be your night.  
I got this long-ass knife.  
And your neck looks just right.*  
--“Cop Killer,” Ice T.

Authority figures are not the only group that explicit rappers focus their aggression towards. In the song “Gimmie Dat,” Rapper Webbie directs his aggression towards women who resist promiscuity.

*Cuz I've been rocked up since I met you  
I'm ready to give you the blues  
Don't stunt now take off your shoes  
Don't act confused you know what time it is*  
  
*Girl give me that pussy  
Girl give me that  
Girl give me girl give me that there*  
--“Gimme Dat,” Webbie

One would assume that a woman, particularly, would take issue with such lyrics. But, as they revealed in their interviews, participants in this study say they do not necessarily take offense to all lyrics in the songs that they like. In fact, some participants revealed even being surprised, themselves, by the fact that they liked the songs considering the graphic lyrics. This could be due in part to the way

that some rap fans view male rappers as being not purposely offensive but as “simply products of their environments” (Gourdine & Lemmons, 2011, p.62), speaking of the things they know in the ways that they’ve heard things spoken of in their own lives. Among our participants, dismissing vulgar lyrics as simply being an expression by an individual not bearing a personal reflection upon its listener led to a further explanation of why gangsta rap fans are not offended by the genre’s harsh lyrics. The above-mentioned song by rap artist Webbie was brought up by one of the participants in the study: Noel, who discovered gangsta rap music in high school. She is now an executive director of a state board agency and a married mother of a toddler. While sitting on her custom-designed sofa and feeding an organic home-cooked meal to her daughter, Noel was asked about a few songs that she has liked listening to throughout the years that she thought to be particularly vulgar and whether or not she took offense to those songs. “Some of it does go overboard,” she said. “Like if I hear a song that just over-uses bad language for no reason, I tend to not want to listen to that,” Noel paused, trying to think of an example of a song that she thought went overboard. But then she realized that the “overboard” song was one that she still liked.

*Subject: “You know Webbie’s song ‘Gimmie Dat?’ That’s an example of a song that sounds bad”.*

*Researcher: “But since the beat is good, do you like it?”*

*Subject: “Yes!” (laugh)*

While Noel admitted to not fully liking the words used in the song, she could not fully say that she did not like the song, itself, saying “You know. I’m

not going to say it's not inappropriate, but I choose to listen to it." She says, when it comes to gangsta rap, her methodology is to not take it personally. "It's just entertainment to me. So while some of the lyrics I can understand are offensive to some people, I understand that that's not me. I know they're not talking about me," Noel said. It was not uncommon, in this study, for gangsta rap fans to distance themselves from the harsh lyrics.

The sentiment is also echoed by 42-year-old Alicia, who recalled having a conversation with a friend during her earliest years of listening to gangsta rap. They challenged each other on whether they could justify the explicit lyrics by separating themselves from the women being rapped about in the songs. "I remember being in a car with sorority sisters. We were road tripping. And playing Snoop (Doggy Dogg)'s album... And one of the sisters said 'The reason I don't mind listening to this is because he's not talking about me,'" Alicia recalled. She said that, at the time, she agreed with her sorority sister's sentiment. But, now as a continued fan of the genre and as a professor specializing in Africana studies, she has had second thoughts. "Fast-forward 20 years, I know I was probably doing much of what she had articulated verbally. And that is trying to make myself disconnect from the fact that it didn't matter who he was talking about or was somebody being pinpointed," she said. "(The rapper) didn't have those boundaries. He was talking about women in general." It is a point that Alicia now makes during her lectures to her college students. "(Women) are trying to disconnect themselves by rationalizing and saying 'Oh he's not talking about me.'

And the fact of the matter is, that's not true. He never said 'I'm talking about Jonie and this one.' It's women in general." Such a point demonstrates the fact that some listeners of gangsta rap struggle with the misogyny of the lyrics, while searching for reasons to justify the songs and excluding themselves from being among the groups targeted in songs. Despite the fact that Alicia came to that realization, she continues to listen to explicit rap, albeit more often from the 1990's, which was the time that she first discovered the genre. However, she reconciles that realization with what she says is an ability to process the information in a responsible way. "The scholar in me has learned to say 'I'm not distanced from this and I need to be able to process it for what it is and use my knowledge to have important conversations, particularly with young women.'" Alicia also noted that not all explicit lyrics are associated with gangsta rap. She said that some of her hip-hop scholar peers are more accepting of vulgar lyrics that come from so-called conscious rappers, who typically do not make their careers rapping about violence. "You've had conscious rappers say some pretty derogatory things. But because they've got that label of being known as more conscious or underground, they get away with it," she said, adding:

*"Tribe Called Quest is my favorite group. But in one of their songs... the lead singer says 'I wanna pound the poontang till it stinks'... That's not a very loving way to talk about making love to a woman! But he says that. And I have not seen anything amongst my hip hop scholar peers where they actually tackle the issue... here we are attacking all of these so-called gangsta rappers and some of our most conscious rappers—or the ones labeled that way – also say some things that deserve criticism or critique or whatever the case may be."*



Now, Alicia is in a position where she can make more subtle distinctions pointing out the misogyny while still expressing appreciation for much of what the genre does in terms of the beat and the social critique. She is an example of a rap fan who takes the lyrics of gangsta rap on several different levels. While she seeks to make the music serve a higher purpose to educate young people, she also cannot deny her attraction to the music.

With vulgar lyrics working their way into songs that have not been tagged with stickers warning of explicit lyrics, Alicia eludes to the notion that gangsta rap is not the only genre that may have the power to offend. That may be why, even with all of her scholarly knowledge, she still does not take personal offense to many of the lyrics she hears. “I do listen to the music,” she said. “I’m not rationalizing it, now. I listen to it in order for me to frame my lecture discussions for the class.” But Alicia admits that her listening to explicit rap music is not solely for the purpose of developing philosophical arguments. When asked what she would do if a gangsta rap song that she recognized was played at a friend’s house, she responded:

*“I have to be transparent. I probably would do a little dance to it or sing the words. Because I know them! But I also feel better about the fact that I know myself enough in that I would be the responsible Auntie, whatever, and say ‘This music is not appropriate for (a young person) to be listening to.’”*

Still, as an adult who has studied hip-hop, Alicia says that having a deeper understanding of the artists, the lyrics and the genre, itself, causes her to not be personally offended by the lyrics.

Alicia is the only interviewee in this study to have sought out a scholarly understanding of gangsta rap. But she is not the only fan to have contemplated reasons why they have not taken offense to explicit lyrics. For most of the subjects in this thesis, a lack of personal offense to the music boils down to one point: they view the music as a form of art and entertainment. David says the profane lyrics rarely speak to him in a personal way. “It’s just entertainment. There have been songs that have spoken to me, but for the most part, it’s purely entertainment. And I don’t get any perspective on anything. It’s a good beat, rhythm and that’s it.” While he is still drawn to the beats of the music, he completely separates himself from the lyrics, allowing him to not internalize the messages of illicit behavior being discussed in gangsta rap. “I don’t necessarily listen to get that message,” he said. Whitley echoes the sentiment, saying that while the songs entertain and excite her, she can’t personally relate to the rapper’s harsh backgrounds, and she recognizes the distinctions between her life and many rappers’ lives. “I went to private school. I went to college. So my experience has been very different from what’s portrayed on songs,” she said. “I grew up in the Cosby house compared to what people talk about. So I can’t think about anything that I can relate to them on.” That, she says, prevents her from taking any of the

lyrics personally and, instead, allows her to dance to the songs and even recite the explicit lyrics in jest.

*“The fact that I rap and (playfully) yell (rap lyrics) in my fiancé’s face. And usually dressed like myself, prissy little girl going (from Ice Cube and Dr. Dre’s song “Natural Born Killaz”) ‘Gi-gi, Gi-gi, Gaga! They call me da-da! Six million ways to murder. Choose one!’ So (laugh) that’s one instance where I don’t fit the character.”*

As was seen in other interviewees, Whitley contrasts her “Cosby” upbringing to the gangsta images in order to separate herself from the negative associations with gangsta rap, thereby excluding herself from even possibly being included among the groups targeted in harsh, profane lyrics.

Lynda, who also came from a very different background than many gangsta rappers, says that she focuses more on the beat of the music than the lyrics. “Words have a meaning, but you really go more with the (musical) flow, not with their issues,” she said. The 37-year-old nurse who grew up in Europe views gangsta rap in the same way that some would view a movie, a video game or a spectator sport. “It’s kind of like watching football game, you’re not living it, but you’re still watching it. You’re listening but you’re not living it.” That, she says, prevents her from taking offense to any harsh lyrics. “I’m a grown person and I know that the world is not like it seems,” she said. Lynda added that the fact that she is a strong-minded individual with her own standards and views on the world allows her to not take explicit lyrics too seriously. “I have my own influence in my own world. You listen to the music... You do feel familiar with

certain things, but you're not that person. So it just actually you're jamming with it." Eva, too, looks at gangsta rap as a type of alternate universe. "They're not offensive to me personally, because I know that's a lifestyle that's not real," she said. This is a different perspective than one would expect from a listener like Eva, who grew up in an unstable environment with one parent (who was often absent). While she did witness behavior like drug dealing in her own neighborhood, she feels as though gangsta rappers exaggerate their violent acts and their levels of wealth, for the purpose of creating attention-getting songs. Eva does not believe that all of the actions portrayed in songs are things that actually happened in reality. "That's a persona," Eva said. "That's not how everyday people live. I don't go to the club every day." Her point is that people should not be offended by something that's not real, no matter how explicit the lyrics may be.

It must be noted that fans of explicit rap songs are not forced to listen to profanity while enjoying those songs. Most modern-day songs in the genre have non-explicit versions available as well. Gangsta rap fans who may be offended by lyrics that go overboard do have the option of purchasing less-offensive versions, in which the profanity has been muted out of the song. However, participants in this study resist the option to purchase censored versions of their favorite songs because they likened it to "listening to instrumentals." That was the Whitley's response, when asked if she ever chooses the censored version of a song over the

explicit version. She said that very rarely has she ever chosen to purchase a clean version of a gangsta rap song. “If you didn’t listen to explicit (version of the song), it’s going to be obnoxiously bleeped or the words are not going to match up with the cadence of the music,” she said. Listeners like Whitley, who previously stated that she most enjoyed listening to gangsta rap with her prim and proper sorority sisters, said they wanted to get the full experience by hearing *all* of the words. They say that the clean versions of explicit rap songs don’t allow them to get a full understanding of the purpose behind the song. “(The clean version) is going to be silenced... (with) what is supposed to be a whole sentence and you’ll only hear three words,” said Whitley.

While the lyrics of gangsta rap certainly have the power to offend, they also have the power to draw fans’ interest. In this section, fans like Noel, who spends her days directing a state board agency, have revealed that the profane lyrics are not personally offensive to them because they don’t count themselves among the persons being talked about in the songs. Those fans, including college professor Alicia, can consciously separate themselves from the people being spoken about in derogatory lyrics. Also, fans like David, the self-employed civil engineer, who say they don’t take offense to the lyrics in gangsta rap say they can’t relate to the harshness of the songs because they choose not to focus on the lyrics. Instead, they focus on the rhythms. David is also among the fans who started listening to gangsta rap as a teenager after already witnessing some illicit

activity on his neighborhood streets as a kid. He did not attempt to hide his musical choices from his peers or parents. His story harkens back to the intersectionality research by Greene in which early personal experiences play a large role in the interpretation of situations, even in adult life (p. 470). Still, others choose to ingest some of the lyrics for the purpose of equipping others to process the information in useful ways. All of the above-mentioned methods have kept the interviewees from taking personal offense to the ideas being portrayed in explicit rap songs.

## KEEPING THE GANGSTA SIDE A SECRET

Some of the participants in this study, such as native European Lynda, have revealed their inability to personally relate to the deeds of violence, promiscuity, drug dealing and law-breaking often talked about in explicit rap songs. They have said that their upbringings were very different from those of gangsta rappers. However, other participants, including Blanca and Eva, who were raised in rough neighborhoods say they have seen such behavior in real life, yet have not participated in it, themselves. In this section, fans of gangsta rap will discuss just how different they feel that they are from their favorite rappers, particularly in their professional realms. As will be shown, some go through great pains to separate themselves from the stereotypes of the music that they (secretly) love.

As the importance of professional identity has been discussed in the literature review portion of this thesis, so has it been brought up with participants in this study. Their candor revealed the strategic methods they employ in order to be develop their own professional image. James, the educational administrator, noted that setting up his own image was always a goal with any new job he began “because when you first come in (a new job), you’re not just looked at for your skills or what you bring to the table. But you’re also looked at for what you perceive.” Often times, he felt as though coworkers and supervisors tested his manners, as much as they did his work skills. “You sit up proper, you lose your

accent,” he said. ”You emote what you know they want you to do and you’re hired.... And you can’t revert back.” Seeking to distance himself from the working-class neighborhood he grew up in, James makes every effort to be perfectly cordial and well-spoken in order to gain the respect of his students and fellow school administrators. In turn, he has risen through the ranks in his career in educational administration. But he has, and other gangsta rap fans may have also given up a part of themselves, as the personal identity has to make way for the desired professional identity. Referring back to the notion of a *habitus*, James’ situation is an example of the inability of a “player” to act in a way that comes naturally to them because the improvisational behavior of an African American man from a working class neighborhood does not jibe with that of mainstream corporate America, in which the rules are predominately established by powerful White men (Corsun & Costen, p. 22).

Concealing a part of her personal identity, Whitley, too, has finessed her workplace image to her own advantage. She believes that her image is most likely to give others the impression that she is an efficient, organized, perfectly-coiffed, ladylike member of bourgeoisie society. “The way that I dress, the way that I present myself. They might think that I’m stuck up. Judging a book by its cover,” she said. Sasha also says that she has been told that her “cover” also does not match the image of gangsta rap: “I always get that ‘You’re so polished!’... Like, what does that mean?” The comments that Whitley and Sasha have gotten on their



appearance versus their preferences in music have furtherer served the purpose that they and other gangsta rap fans have: to (either consciously or subconsciously) distance themselves and their professional images from the controversial form of music. Seeming the opposite of the image associated with gangsta rap may be what fans in the study prefer: to be seen worlds apart from the creators of explicit rap songs.

African American men who are gangsta rap fans are also very aware of the stereotypes that may be projected upon them even without revealing their preference for explicit music. David feels as though previous colleagues had purposely had lowered expectations for him, as an African American male.

“Being an African American man, they probably figure I would listen to hip hop,” he assumed. Keith had an almost identical statement in that regard, stating: “Just the fact that I’m a young black man... they automatically think I would listen to rap.” Keith and David’s feelings could be the result of a dynamic that Tajfel found in his study of intergroup relations. He revealed the prevalence of situations in which stereotypes are directed towards workers who may stand out from others, because of factors like race. In those situations, people who are members of some social groups “become salient because of their minority or ‘solo’ status in a group of mixed composition” (Tajfel, p. 5). In other words, being the only African American, or African American male, in an office setting could cause workers like Keith and David to be looked at more closely because, for example, “one black in a group of whites leave a relatively ‘stronger impression’” (Tajfel,

p. 5). That possibility could be the reason Keith goes out of his way to be associated with a variety of music and, therefore, people. “I even try to diversify myself. Asking coworkers ‘What do you listen to. What do you like?’ That’s how I got into Three Doors Down and Led Zeppelin, The Police. All of that stuff... Eric Clapton,” he says with a smirk, knowing that his knowledge of such artists is quite the opposite of what some would assume for a Black man in his 20’s. Those perceived stereotypical expectations of Black men and hip hop can have professionally damaging consequences.

Listeners of gangsta rap worry that their preference of such music would lead coworkers and supervisors to believe that they, too are as violent and dangerous as the rappers they listen to. Since James holds a career that puts in him in the position of a role model for young children and a resource for their parents, he is more self-conscious about his personal musical choices and the messages that those choices convey. James is among the African American male respondents who hold a higher awareness of the thought that young Black men are expected to like gangsta rap and endorse (or perhaps even participate in) the violent ideas depicted in the music. Such a notion causes him to believe that his fandom of gangsta rap would lead others to paint him as an aggressive, intimidating figure, a sentiment also noted by other African American men in this study.

African American women interviewed in his study, however, did not focus as much on the worry that they would be perceived as violent or dangerous just because they are gangsta rap fans. Alicia says that her worldly knowledge, approachability and interest in different cultures is opposite of what may be the image of the stereotypical gangsta rap fan. “I think people who don’t know me would never assume that there is an interest in participation in hip hop culture,” said Alicia, who holds two master’s degrees and a Ph.D. Lynda, the nurse who moved to the U.S. after growing up in Germany, had a similar viewpoint, stating that her outward appearance as a nurse would never serve as a hint to her preference in music. “Because when you walk around in a suit, no one would ever think you have a little ‘Dirty South’ in you.” While the women acknowledge that their musical preference may come as a surprise, they were less likely than male respondents to assume that others would be afraid of them because of their musical choice. Instead, their worries were focused on not being seen as professional. The differences between African American male and female gangsta rap fans gives another example of the previously-discussed contextuality. Being a male, on top of being African American, created an extra layer of potential discrimination and “overlapping consequences” (Christian & Thomas, p. 70) that create yet another threat to the ability of study participants to establish a dominant habitus in their workplace or “game” (Corsun & Costen, p. 18).

Some fans of gangsta rap don't assume that colleagues would judge them based on their musical preference. Eva believes that her colleagues appreciate the differences in different people. She thinks that people who do not listen to gangsta rap would not harshly judge those that do. Instead, Eva believes that non-fans would just look at it as another form of music. "I think (non-listeners) define it as a genre of music that (rap fans) relate to. They don't identify the person (by their choice in music)." Thus, Eva views her knowledge of gangsta rap as an advantage in her work environment which includes graduate students that she oversees. "I'm able to relate to the students and know that I'm not so generationally-removed that I don't know the music out today." She says those students are not surprised by the fact that she listens to explicit rap music. Thus, she feels more open to reveal that aspect of herself to her colleagues.

But, in this research, Eva's case turned out to be an exception. The other fans of gangsta rap sampled in this study sought to put such a distance between themselves and the music they love. Participants say it is not just because of the stereotypes that may be projected upon them because of their race. They say also that there are specific stereotypes of gangsta rap fans that are so strong that they fear their credibility can be damaged. Nearly every participant had an immediate response, when asked what they believe non-rap fans thought of people who listened to explicit rap. Many of the responses were so poignant and adamant that, for the purpose of this research, they are being listed consecutively.

*Whitley: “That they’re all Black. They’re poor. They are dangerous and violent ant they’re criminals. And all negative things.”*

*Blanca: “That they’re thugs, ghetto, a lower class of people, uneducated, violent, racist.*

*James: (Frowning and waving hands) “ (They think you’re) gangersterish, you’re ignorant. You’re a bad person, ignorant, not smart, from the ghetto, from the hood.”*

*Sasha: “People would think ‘She might be the girlfriend of a drug dealer’ because people think that way. They think that you’re low-income or uneducated or things like that... Or that you’re very young.”*

*Lynda: “That they’re violent and angry and negative... or (that) you have to be that way to get somewhere.”*

*Keith: “Uneducated, maybe they do drugs... violent, angry. Those are some of the (assumptions). Scary, violent. That’s what the music portrays.”*

*Noel: “Economically challenged, ignorant, uneducated... Aggressive.”*

These responses are strong examples of previously-discussed panopticon, in which gangsta rap fans anticipate the negative reaction of coworkers who are presumably watching this study’s participants while they are in the workplace. With such negative associations playing in the minds of fans of explicit rap music, it came as no surprise that the majority of participants (8 out of 10) were reluctant to make their musical tastes known to those in the workplace. “When you get a lot of Black professionals, higher-up, successful, upwardly-mobile, people, then sometimes they feel threatened by the idea,” said Sasha. “There’s more of a need to assimilate to the surroundings which may mean hiding their musical

preferences, especially if it's so far urban and hip hop." Participants said they feared that their coworkers and supervisors would immediately assume that they, as gangsta rap fans, would have the same traits, beliefs, characteristics and attitudes as gangsta rappers. "(There is a) stereotype that goes along with it," said Keith of the music. "Traditionally, that hasn't been acceptable." An association with those stereotypes, participants said, could cause them to lose the respect of their colleagues. "I think they would look down on me, which is why I keep it secret," said James of his preference for explicit rap. Blanca expressed the same fear: "I just don't want people to change their opinion of me, if I don't know them yet. So if that's something that's not acceptable to them, then I won't mention it because I don't want their view of me to be changed." It seemed that no matter how hard the interviewed professionals worked to establish their professional identity as being dependable, trustworthy individuals, the fear of a coworker or supervisor discovering their musical preference remained in the back of their minds. Such stories are examples of the theory of panopticon, in which the presumption of being watched effects the behavior of participants and, for them, is a constant source of worry.

Most interviewees admitted to feeling as though their personal and professional identities conflicted, when considering their choices in music. And many of them made conscious efforts to not let their personal music preference be revealed—either at work or in public. Keith and Sasha both used similar tactics,

but at different places. They both listen to a great deal of gangsta rap in the car, except for when that car is at certain places. “I have a long drive to work. So music gets me through that. I play it loud. And every time I turn on one street that gets me close to my job, I turn it down,” he said. “I turn it down, so nobody can hear it.” But Keith does recall one embarrassing time in which he was caught red-handed, so to speak, when attempting to take a coworker to lunch. “I turned the car on, and the (explicit) music started playing. And you get embarrassed and cut the music off! Somebody can’t ride with you to lunch,” Keith said, able to laugh at the situation now. Sasha’s car is also the main place that she listens to explicit rap, however, she does not wait until she gets to work to make adjustments to her music. “I live right downtown in an area that’s so busy with tourists and people who are working in the financial district and people who go downtown. And I play my music (in my car) really, really loud. Not with the windows down, but in my car,” Sasha said. “When I get to right underneath the underpass of (my condominium building), right before I get there, I’ll turn it down before I drive into my driveway.” For Sasha, it’s uncomfortable for neighbors or even complete strangers to hear the bass of gangsta rap blaring from her car speakers. The discomfort partially arises from her own perceptions of other people who are enjoying the very same music at a loud level in their own cars. “I think when I see it, I always do a double-take, like ‘what is this person like?’”

Such a reaction harkens back to the points related to social identity theory and reveals the preconceived notions that even gangsta rap listeners hold for fans

of the genre. But it could also reveal the damage that the negative public perception of rap music can have on its fans' self-esteem. Those fans may internalize critics' disdain for the music as one of their own negative qualities. Drawing from various indices of identification, Doise notes that people, including gangsta rap fans, partially form their own self-identities based on associations made by people outside of their group (Doise, p. 101). If an outside group associates gangsta rap and its fans with crime, ignorance and poverty, those fans are more likely to do as Keith and Sasha have done: distance themselves from an association with gangsta rap, when they believe that they may be within earshot of anyone who may not appreciate the genre of music.

But, even in what are supposed to be private settings, participants revealed still feeling worried that their musical tastes would be discovered if played out loud. James recalls his years as a teacher, when he had about an hour a day to take a break and catch up on various work for his classroom. That time took place while all schoolchildren were outside of the classroom. "I tried it one day. I put on some Kanye West and listened to it. And I just felt out of place in my classroom," James said, acknowledging his awareness of the expectations of appropriateness in the workplace and how rap music does not fit into that expectation. Even though none of James' students or colleagues were in the room when he turned on that song, his need to hide his love of explicit rap took precedent. "Even though I'm in my classroom, on my free period. I could listen to whatever I wanted to. No one would care. But I would feel out of place, listening to it." Yet again, an



insecurity based on outsiders' associations with and perceptions of gangsta rap prevents one of its fans from listening to the music even in a setting that is deemed more private. Even though no one is in James' room, the notion of being on the "playing field" noted by Corsun & Costen is enough to make him self-correct and "renegotiate... the rules of the game" (p. 18) as a professional in order to help him establish his desired professional identity. James also engages in the practice of panopticon, censoring himself even when not in the presence of coworkers, because he feels uneasy with his own personal musical preference while at work. For that reason, James now defaults to a different setting on his musical playlists, even when no one else is around. "There's a reason why, when I'm at work, my Pandora (music account) is set to Easy Jazz and Jazz classical. And I find it odd that a few clicks away is (the category) Southern Hip Hop or Classic Hip Hop."

All of the participants were asked if they would consider revealing their love for gangsta rap to their colleagues. The respondents said they would consider revealing that aspect of their personal life if they felt like it may have been a safe environment to do so. For example, Noel said that she has shared some of her music with lower-ranking coworkers who may be less likely to judge her. "My assistant would want to listen to my iPod and I would tell her 'There may be a song come up that's rap.' And she would say 'That's not a big deal.' But I don't think I would listen to (the songs) with (my assistant). I just warn her that (explicit rap) may come up." Noel, however, does not agree with playing gangsta rap even

with her assistant in certain situations. “I wouldn’t play it in a car on a way to a meeting,” she said, with an uneasy expression. Uncomfortable situations for Sasha to listen to gangsta rap include certain social settings, too. “If it’s in mixed company, I’m not OK with it.” Sasha explained “mixed company” to include various age groups and races. When asked why such was the case, her response had racially-charged undertones. “It’s a double-standard when I really think about it,” she said. “But I don’t find it ok to use words like the N word or even things that are misogynistic. But when I’m working out to the music or in the car, I become a part... it changes my mood. It changes what I’m thinking. But when people who aren’t Black are listening to it or repeating the lyrics when I’m in the room, it just makes me super uncomfortable.” That discomfort could be a result of the previously-discussed impressions and assumptions that fans of gangsta rap think non-fans have of them, assuming that all young African American persons enjoy listening to the music and, therefore, endorse its harsh language and messages.

While Sasha is uncomfortable revealing her musical preference in mixed company, Keith has found his own safe environments to speak the truth about his love of gangsta rap. He views it as somewhat of a cultural exchange. “(I had) a coworker in New York who was older than me but appreciated good music. I could let him listen to Tupac or Mos Def, Talib Kweli. And he would listen like “Oh this is cool, I like this. Now it’s my turn (to let you hear some of my music).” That type of exchange has continued in Keith’s current job.

*“Even coworkers who are my age who are white, they listen to the same music that I listen to. They may have more variety of other things, but the mainstream rap music, they know it too... There’s a girl who’s about 34 and she’s a white female. And we listen to the rap music and I let her hear some of the more explicit, underground stuff that she may have never heard of. I let her listen to it, just to get a laugh out of it... So she’s not really familiar with it.”*

But Keith still chooses not to open up about his musical tastes to all coworkers. “People my age, I have no problem with,” he said. “But my superiors, no. Even if they’re White or Black. None of them. I wouldn’t put on rap when either is in the car.” Keith and other explicit rap fans draw a harsh line, clearly establishing who they feel will be most dissuaded by their taste in music: older supervisors who dismiss explicit rap music as worthless and dangerous (and, thus, categorize its listeners in the same way).

Despite some respondents’ reluctance to reveal their musical choices to superiors, this research also found that, as gangsta rap fans move up in the ranks of their careers, they are more likely to feel more comfortable discussing that aspect of themselves. While James previously mentioned having to display pristine etiquette and professional behavior when seeking to be hired for a job. He said that, after spending years in the workplace and earning the respect of his coworkers, he may feel less likely to be judged if he reveals his musical preference. “Yeah, (I could reveal that I like gangsta rap) now, because I’m comfortable in my profession and established in my profession. Early on, there was no way.” The same is true for Alicia who admitted to being reluctant to reveal her preference for gangsta rap in the early years in her career. She,

however, says that being established in her career has brought about a confidence that would make her more likely to discuss explicit rap with coworkers and superiors. “I think at this point in my career, no (I’m not reluctant) because I’m at a place where I get to set the standards. As a consequence, that gives you autonomy to say ‘I’m at peace.’” Alicia’s story seems to demonstrate the point that power (in one’s career) breeds confidence that may cause gangsta rap fans to disclose more of their personal lives in professional settings, especially if they are in a position of authority and feel as though they can establish the standards in their office place.

The “peace” experienced by successful professionals who listen to gangsta rap is, such as Alicia, is not guaranteed to others. The African American male participants in the study were very aware of perceived stereotypes associated with people of their race and gender. Therefore, they made conscious efforts to distance themselves from the violent, aggressive imagery depicted in gangsta rap. Even those who didn’t refer to racial stereotypes, though, feel as though the revelation of their musical tastes would have a detrimental effect on the way they are viewed in a professional setting. Therefore, the establishment of a professional identity takes precedent over a need to fully reveal details of one’s personal life.

## GANGSTA FOR LIFE

For more than 20 years, gangsta rap and its fans have grown alongside each other. With participants in this study encountering the music as young adults, teens and elementary school students the form of music became a part of their lives in which they were very impressionable. The question remains, though, will explicit rap fans outgrow their beloved music?

Interviewees responded to their own thoughts of growing out of the music as well as whether there was a societal expectation that they would, one day, be considered too mature to listen to such music. Considering the skepticism met by gangsta rappers and their songs when the genre first made its debut, some fans say they have no doubt that they were expected to only have a short-lived relationship with explicit rap. “The entire genre was expected to fade away. People thought it was a fad and it would be gone,” said Alicia. “But the beauty about something that is generated from grassroots culture is that people can tap back into it whenever they want to.” That, she says, has kept the genre relevant to her and to so many other fans.

When participants like James consider the immaturity of some of the lyrics, they conclude that they were expected to grow out of gangsta rap. “I think because of the carelessness that some (rappers) have used with the lyrics and the outfits, and the personas... there was a time when hip hop almost resembled the WWE,” said James of the braggadocios styles and dramatic tales of gangsta

rappers whose albums he has purchased. But he admits, even though the expectation may have been there, he has not discontinued listening to gangsta rap.

Other interviewees have also resisted the notion of abandoning gangsta rap, but unlike James and Alicia, they do not feel as though they should even be expected to outgrow the genre. “When you look at history, did your parents grow out of the music that they listened to, as our grandparents thought they would?” asked Whitley. “Did our parents every grow out of listening to Eric Clapton and Elvis Presley and anybody who was not the norm of what you would hear in those days?” In a strikingly similar way, Noel explained why she thought she should not be expected to stop being a fan of gangsta rap just because she is now a successful professional. “The music that our parents came up on, they never grew out of it,” she said. “It just so happened to not be that type of music. But their dirty music was Marvin Gaye and they loved it. So I don’t see why I should be expected to grow out of the music that I’m liking.” David, too, referenced the fact that previous generations who pioneered the Rock & Roll and Soul eras refused to give up their favorite forms of music. But he also offered what some could consider a compromise for gangsta rap fans. “I don’t see why we would stop listening to it. At least not what we listened to when we were younger. Maybe you’ll stop listening to the newer stuff, but you still feel some of the older stuff.”

That “older stuff,” the respondents say, will *always* make them move, no matter how much success they achieve. “When I’m sitting in the car with my friends, when I go (back to my hometown), and we’re sitting there saying ‘I love

hip hop! I'm not gonna stop!' ... Two late-30-something guys sitting in a truck boomin' hip hop," James says before letting out a big laugh. Although it wasn't analyzed in-depth for the purpose of this study, some interviewees did touch upon the topic of how they would handle their love for gangsta rap with the responsibility of parenting. Some respondents who already have children discussed tactics ranging from explaining the music to their children to not playing the music at all. They mulled over the fact that they could be the first generation of parents whose music is more explicit than their children's music (instead of vice-versa). It led Whitley to an interesting thought on the future of gangsta rap: "You have to think how much more outrageous can people get with what they say. Because rappers already say some pretty outrageous stuff.... How much worse can it get? Maybe clean will be the new cool."

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Fans of explicit rap may feel like they are just living their lives, but their daily behaviors are actually demonstrative of a number of theories and concepts that illustrate the difficulty that some groups experience in straddling what can be perceived as two worlds. From their initial experiences with explicit rap music as youth to their current experiences as successful working professionals, the behaviors of adult gangsta rap fans illustrate a number of issues.

When professionals become a part of a workplace, they implicitly recognize that they are adopting certain patterns of behavior in order to “fit in.” The research literature on professional identity identifies some of the expectations associated with this fitting in, and the participants in this study voiced similar expectations for themselves. But the process of fitting in is not the same for everyone. The tension between rap and professional identity centers around the fact that the genre runs so counter to mainstream opinion (Gourdine & Lemmons, 59). From their language to their flashy gold chains to their penchant for violence, rappers have made a living by not being part of suburban society or corporate America (Gourdine & Lemmons, 60). Encountering gangsta rap as youth, participants in this study note that, even if they were from “good”



neighborhoods, the values of suburban social society or corporate America were not of as much of a value to them as the latest rap songs.

Reviewing this thesis data in light of theories of professional identity and rap music, one can see a pattern concerning the degree to which gangsta rap censor themselves and their listening habits. None of the participants engaged in absolutely no forms of self-censorship. In some way, shape or form, they all engaged in self-censorship, making conscientious decisions about how and when they listen and to whom they reveal their preference for explicit rap music. We saw this self-censorship occur on two levels: *extreme* self-censorship or *flexible* self-censorship when it came to how they listened to the music and revealed their musical preference in the workplace. The study's prime example of extreme self-censorship is James, who would not even listen to gangsta rap music in his own empty classroom. Sasha is another example of the extreme self-censorship model because of her tendency to turn down her music whenever she gets near her own home. Whitney, Blanca, David and Lynda also expressed a strong desire to keep their tastes hidden. Blanca resisted playing gangsta rap music in the salon that she owns, because she did not want her clients to think of her in a negative way. Whitley said that it would be inappropriate to even talk about gangsta rap in her office, unless she made a joke out of the genre. David sought to distance himself even from the thought of being associated with gangsta rap, because of the negative connotation that he felt it brought to African American males. In

contrast, the remaining study participants, Alicia, Eva, Noel and Keith, embrace a practice of more flexible self-censorship, as will be discussed below.

While Keith engaged in some aspects of extreme self-censorship, by doing things like turning down his explicit rap music when he arrived at work (or not listening to it on the way to work at all), he demonstrated more of a likelihood to be flexible with revealing himself as a gangsta rap fan when he felt as though the circumstances were right. Keith did not seek to hide his love for explicit rap when he was in the company of coworkers who he felt would understand. Those coworkers were of mixed races and engaged in a type of cultural exchange with Keith. He would let them listen to some of his favorite explicit rap songs. And they would let him listen to some of their favorite songs, which would be in genres that Keith had never heard or understood. With flexible self-censorship, Keith was able to reveal that part of himself to some coworkers. Eva engaged in the most liberal examples of self-censorship, sharing her musical tastes more freely than other participants, while still being aware of the negative image of gangsta rap. She balanced the negativity out by looking at her musical collection as a means of relating to her younger coworkers.

The age at which the participants were introduced to rap, how much the music reflected their earlier life experience, whether or not they were bothered by misogynistic lyrics and even their own racial/ethnic and economic backgrounds did not seem to have an effect on the type of censorship participants utilized. For example, while Keith first listened to gangsta rap around the age of kindergarten

and James encountered gangsta rap during his middle school years, both still fell into the same category of extreme self-censorship. Eva's low-income background and Keith's upper-middle-class upbringing suggests that economic class does not make a difference with respect to self-censorship, as they are both categorized as engaging in flexible self-censorship when it comes to their listening to gangsta rap. Furthermore, the degree to which participants took offense to profane lyrics was not found to play a role in their level of self-censorship either. Noel, who worked for a state board agency, was not as bothered by the lyrics and felt free to share her music with some of her colleagues. Alicia, too, was willing to discuss her musical preference with others, but as a college professor, she was bothered by the misogynistic lyrics in some of her favorite gangsta rap songs. Instead of factors like offensiveness of the music or economics, age and race of the listeners, this study found that participants' listening habits (and their willingness to expose those habits) were more likely to be affected by the impact of gangsta rap on their moods and study participants' ranking in the workplace hierarchy.

Study participant Noel felt only comfortable discussing gangsta rap songs with a lower-ranking coworker, thus feeling like she was losing no professional respect or social capital by sharing her musical preference. Harkening back to Bourdieu's "master concepts" that value social capital (alongside economic and cultural capital) (Rogers, 1999, p. 235), not every person is equally equipped to begin building a stockpile of social capital from an early age. The lyrics of desperation, frustration and street survival make it possible for some listeners,

such as James and Blanca, to identify the lyrics of these explicit rappers with everyday life in their childhood neighborhoods. But, once listeners move beyond rough neighborhoods and achieve corporate success, the part of them that could originally relate to gangsta rap may not be as evident. While knowing the legacies of explicit rap artists like Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg may be valuable social and cultural capital to an inner-city young adult, their interpretation of valuable social capital quickly shifts when they enter the professional world. Having limited opportunities to develop relationships with the types of people who are typically in power in professional settings, a number of minorities find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to relating to people in positions of power, with respect to cultural capital (Corsun & Costen, p.17).

Those minorities begin their professional careers with a habitus that does not match that of his or her superiors or (in some cases) coworkers, making it more difficult to understand and effectively execute the rules of the workplace game, in which “success in a given field is primarily a function of the degree to which one’s feel for the game matches the game itself” (Corsun & Costen, p. 18). In other words, gangsta rap fans who grew up accepting the music as an appropriate form of cultural expression that can be openly discussed with peers, may be at a professional disadvantage by either not having interacted with those who have a dominant habitus or by being made to feel awkward, once it is discovered that their natural, improvisational behavior is the exact opposite of what those in power have deemed acceptable. Such a problem can be

compounded when a professional's music choice impacts their emotions in a negative way. Participants such as Keith felt as though listening to certain explicit rap songs on the way to work would make him too angry, and thus take him out of the carefully-crafted persona he has developed at work. And, at such a time, Keith's improvisational behavior (of outwardly expressing his frustration) would not match with the improvisational behavior of his colleagues and supervisors. Keith believes that such a situation would cause him to stand out in a negative way.

If a person is unable to feel comfortable acting as himself or herself, the natural reaction is to change the "self" that is presented in the company of others. Maintaining a professional identity is associated with presenting oneself as "polished," to use the words of study participant Sasha. It is associated with maintaining the appearance of being "proper," as referenced by James. These terms used by study participants are similar to Ibarra's definition of professional identity as including one's "attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences," as noted earlier.

But having different experiences and attributes can be damaging if those experiences and attributes are viewed to be negative. As noted in Kimbelé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, as examined by Anderson & McCormack, the potential for damage and discrimination is compounded by race (p. 949). Assumptions made about race and about gangsta rap pose the risk of a dual negative impact on rap fans who are in a professional setting surrounded by

those who do not approve of the profane, violent lyrics and stories that compose so many gangsta rap songs. The effects of intersectionality can also be intensified for people like study participant Keith who is one of only a few minorities in a managerial position at his company. Having the potential to be the only minority with which his colleagues interact on any given day, Keith (and others like him) also deal with the pressure of a polarized evaluation by non-Black coworkers who may more closely analyze the behavior of the single minority in a group (Tajfel, p. 5). And even in settings where they may not be the only minorities in an office setting, “blacks tend to be stereotyped whether they were solo or members of evenly balanced mixed groups” (Tajfel, p. 5). It is no wonder that African American fans of explicit rap music like David are immediately defensive about any assumptions that they would listen to gangsta rap music... even though, in reality, they do listen to the music.

With gangsta rap fans seeking to shield themselves from intersectional discrimination, study participants revealed the practice of shifting their behaviors while in an office environment. They refrain from listening to gangsta rap in professional settings or even acknowledging the music around coworkers, as a way to seek separation. The distancing of oneself from gangsta rap in these ways as well is a protective mechanism, designed to shield explicit rap fans from the negative stereotypes associated with gangsta rap. According to rap fans, those stereotypes can range from a lack of education to perceived aggression and

violence. Listeners like James, David and Keith are very aware of those stereotypes and seek to avoid them.

One method of avoiding being a victim of such stereotyping is by changing and censoring their own behavior via a cultural panopticon. It is a practice that spans many types of spectrums, as minority groups seek to not stand out in a negative way. In the same way that Muslim high school athletes try to temper their feelings of frustration while fasting during Ramadan, for fear of making a negative impression on their teammates (Roy et.al, 2012, p.60), Gangsta rap fans censor their own moods, emotions and behaviors in order to avoid negative attention. The fans shift their behavior in order to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with gangsta rap.

Furthermore, once again using a framework of intersectionality and its risk for increased prejudice, African American men in this study expressed a sentiment of being *expected* to listen to gangsta rap and, thus mimic the violent behavior being discussed in the lyrics. Therefore, those listeners saw it as even more necessary to draw a clear distinction between themselves and the gangsta rappers whose music they purchased. Although this is a small study, the findings here are suggestive that revealing an interest in rap may be particularly treacherous for males due to the potential for association between rap music and negative behaviors. Revealing interest in rap is therefore not only related to one's felt sense of identifications with a community, therefore; it's also related to gender identity.

While the fans of gangsta rap felt free to share the details of their preference for the controversial form of music for the purpose of this thesis, they are not always willing to share such details with everyone around them. Gangsta rap fans have thus identified “safe” environments in which they feel comfortable revealing that aspect of themselves. As revealed by Noel, often times the safe situations are hierarchy-specific, with Noel choosing to let a lower-ranking assistant listen to her collection of explicit rap. Even fans who view their fandom of explicit rap as a positive experience find that it is a benefit that is primarily dependent on one’s ranking in the workplace. Eva demonstrates such by viewing her knowledge of gangsta rap as valuable social capital with lower-ranking graduate students who work in her laboratory. Such a strategic decision on when it may be appropriate to identify themselves as gangsta rap fans reveals an awareness of cultural capital and its ability to provide a better habitus—or position—to study participants who are constantly seeking to adjust their behavior to the rules of the workplace “game” (Corsun & Costen, p. 19).

As was revealed by study participants, fans of explicit rap do not always match the images of their favorite rappers. In fact, as this study found, those fans who live professional, successful lives largely feel as though their appreciation for gangsta rap serves them in their personal lives but can hurt them in professional lives. The controversy that has surrounded explicit rap music from its very inception still follows the genre today. It leads some fans to fear that the lyrics of violence could give their reputations a black eye. This study has shown that such



a risk inhibits fans of explicit rap from fully incorporating their personal identities into their professional identities for fear of being shunned.

## CONCLUSION

Many fans of explicit rap developed a taste for the music during their youth and young adult years. However, as they find themselves in their middle-aged years, fans are met with a conflict of wanting to still enjoy their music and not wanting to be associated with the negative stereotypes connected to the music, especially in their professional environments. The result is varying levels of self-censorship among successful professionals who listen to explicit rap music. As this thesis has demonstrated, most of the white-collar professionals in this study believe that the revelation of their musical taste could carry negative consequences. Therefore, they resist revealing their musical preference in professional settings. But that self-censorship is also a denial of a part of rap fans' personal and cultural identities.

As this thesis has affirmed, professional identity is developed in relation to a culture of the profession one joins and in relation to one's personal identity. But this study has shown that combining all aspects of one's personal and professional life is not only difficult but also intimidating for fans of gangsta rap. Their fear of being judged, stereotyped or shunned causes some professionals to resist revealing all aspects of their true selves to coworkers and supervisors. This proves the point that certain forms of cultural expressions are still not considered acceptable in the workplace or outside of the workplace (if, in fact, it is discovered that some professionals listen to gangsta rap on their personal time).

Some participants in this study have likened gangsta rap to an art form. Yet, they feel as though the majority of people in corporate America would disagree. So they suppress that aspect of their culture, in order to avoid being stereotyped or discriminated against because of their musical choices and, for African American fans, their race (an example of intersectionality).

But when fans hide their musical listening choices, they hide a part of themselves. Listeners like Blanca and James felt that, on some level, gangsta rap was expressing the angst of life in their low-income and working class neighborhoods. Even though they have left those neighborhoods behind, the genre of music still acts as somewhat of a connector back to the place where they grew up. And, on some level, it also expresses the frustration and elation of situations that still arise in their daily lives. On the other hand, fans in this study who never had personal inner-city experiences still connect with aspects of the music. Yet they found a variety of ways to distance themselves from those lyrics and those experiences. Like the White college students that Iwamoto (2007) studied, David noted that he didn't even listen to the lyrics but rather focused on the enjoyment of the beat. Or, as in Whitley's case, fans might associate the music positively with connections they have made in the past with others in the African American community, finding in rap a feeling of elation because, as in Whitney's case, rap is associated with the memories of joining a sorority that gave her a greater sense of camaraderie that she felt she missed in the largely White upper-middle-class context of her youth. Still, the positive connotations that gangsta rap music

listeners associate with the genre are not enough to allow most of them to feel confident in revealing their musical choice.

Under the presumption that coworkers and supervisors are already closely-watching their behavior (an example of cultural panopticon), most study participants chose to hide their musical preference in hopes that they would be seen as meeting expectations for successful professionals by having their behaviors more closely match that of their colleagues. Participants thought that such an action would lead to better positioning and power (i.e. *habitus*) in the workplace. While this practice deflects most immediate negative reactions to the stereotypes of gangsta rap, it does not deflate or eliminate the power of those negative stereotypes to shape one's identity. This study found that concealing one's preference for explicit rap music does not just happen in office or professional settings. It also happens in private settings and on "fields" in which participants should feel as though they have a more established *habitus*. Blanca avoids playing gangsta rap music in the salon she *owns*. James avoids listening to gangsta rap in his own *empty* classroom. And Sasha turns down the music inside her *own car* when she pulls up to her high-rise condominium. Such examples beg the question: "What effect does hiding their musical preference—in public and private—have on gangsta rap fans' self-esteem?" Such a question is worthy of further research, as listeners of explicit rap continue to mature and enter career fields in which their listening choices are thought to be unprofessional and unpolished.

Also worthy of further research are the self-censorship patterns that this study has revealed. Most of the gangsta rap fans interviewed in this study revealed that they either engaged a type of flexible self-censorship or in an extreme self-censorship. In instances of flexible self-censorship participants like Noel were willing to reveal their preference of gangsta rap music to lower-ranking coworkers. Another flexible self-censorship practice, demonstrated by human resources manager Keith, showed that some gangsta rap fans are willing to reveal their preference to those coworkers with whom they felt they could engage in a type of cultural-exchange by explaining their preference for the music and, in turn, have that coworker play one of their favorite (possibly controversial) songs. Participants, like college professor Alicia (who also engaged in flexible self-censorship), looked at her listening habits as an opportunity to discuss the gangsta rap and the social issues that arise from the controversy that surrounds it. Several participants also noted that they feel more comfortable discussing their love for explicit rap music, if they have a higher-ranking job title and the security that comes along with it. Those who engaged in extreme self-censorship were less likely to discuss their gangsta rap preference with anyone in the workplace. They were also more likely to limit their own listening of the music even in private settings with no visible person in sight. Reasoning for such behavior included a worry over neighbors and coworkers hearing the music and the simple explanation that listening to such music at a certain place and time did not “feel right.” Those feelings, as shown in this study, can be affected by the music, itself,

with some fans using gangsta rap as a mood management tool. They avoid the genre in professional settings (or even in their cars on the way to work) because of the aggression conveyed in some of the songs and how that aggression could affect their own moods while at work. Such dynamics are worthy of further study on gangsta rap as a mood-management tool. This issues of self-censorship brought about in this study also raise questions over how fans of explicit rap managing their listening habits in other social and professional situations.

This study also raises concerns over the limitations of professional identity as it applies to people who listen to a controversial form of music. Fans of explicit rap, especially African American fans, mask their musical tastes while in front of colleagues and supervisors. Such an action demonstrates a discrepancy in the ability of every person to develop a professional identity since some professionals have to pick and choose which aspects of themselves to reveal and which seem too risky to be made public. Therefore, it is concluded that an established, healthy professional identity-- in which one gains the respect of his coworkers and the desired hierarchal level of success-- is not equally accessible to everyone, including fans of gangsta rap.

This research raises issues that warrant future research. Individuals who feel unable to fully include their personal lives in the development of their personal identity can experience limited opportunities for growth in their careers. It begs the question of whether a controversial choice of music (and the accompanying stereotypes) has made gangsta rap fans stop themselves from even

considering certain careers; for fear that their musical choice is indicative of an inferior quality, due to the lack of societal acceptance of gangsta rap. One has to wonder if some fans of gangsta rap opt out of professional careers because their musical tastes lead them to believe that they would not fit into those professional settings. Also, further research may be able to answer the question of whether people from various backgrounds censor themselves in ways that can prevent the appreciation of workplace diversity. As has been revealed in this body of work colleagues' criticism need only be perceived by a fan of explicit rap in order to have an impact on his or her ability to develop a professional identity. This thesis also suggests that further study on how workplaces can become more inclusive is warranted.

Based on my analysis of the interviewee responses, this study suggests the two practices -- professional survival and denial of culture -- are interdependent on each other within the contemporary context of defining acceptable professional identity. One can't successfully survive in the professional arena unless one consciously denies one's cultural tastes and personal identity. Conversely, one has to deny one's cultural tastes in order to successfully survive within the professional arena, especially if that taste challenges the institutionalized values of an entrenched White, male habitus as gangsta rap does. Until the constraining values that presently define professional identity are replaced by an inclusive policy that embraces cultural diversity including gangsta rap, individuals such as Eva, Whitley, Blanca, James or David will have to continue to deny important

aspects of their personal identity. Ultimately, is this a fulfilling way to live one's life?

What might it take to create a professional climate in which persons who have controversial personal music tastes still feel accepted and comfortable enough to discuss their musical preferences with colleagues and superiors, and what difference might such an inclusion make in the workplace? This thesis, with its suggestion of a connection between personal taste and both workplace and self-censorship, raises these questions. Such a study on the development of an inclusive professional climate could add to a larger understanding as to how people from various backgrounds censor themselves in ways that can prevent the appreciation of workplace diversity.

Through a decades-long relationship with the genre, fans of explicit rap have made it clear that they do not intend to abandon the music that speaks so personally to them. Whether their connection is through the rhythmic arrangements, the social ideas conveyed or the inner-city angst documented, gangsta rap listeners have made the music a part of their lives. However, only certain people in their lives are aware of that fact. As explicit rap fans mature and become successful, responsible members of society, they undergo a public image transformation that separates them from their favorite rap songs. Such a transformation forces many of them to separate themselves from a part of their culture, gangsta rap, while in professional settings. Those fans see that separation as a means of (professional) survival.



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## APPENDIX

Name (Race)	Age	Career	First Explicit Rap Music Experience (Approximate Age)	Econ Class as Child	Lyrics Offend?	Reveal At Work?
Alicia (Afro Latino)	42	College Professor	20s; Writing Grad School papers; bond with friends	Working Class	No ("should be")	Yes
Blanca (Latina)	27	Hair Company CEO Salon Owner	7; Singing Dr. Dre lyrics on playground in kindergarten	Low Income	No	No
David (Black)	35	Civil Engineer & Company Owner	13; Middle school colleagues; not unusual language	Working Class	No ("just the beat")	No
Eva (Pakistani & Black)	33	Science Researcher	13; Asked to borrow tape; wanted to learn lyrics	Low Income	No	Yes
James (Black)	38	Middle School Administrator / Teacher	13; Reluctant; Friend encouraged him to listen to tape	Working Class	No (some guilt)	No (except friends)
Lynda (Bosnian)	37	Registered Nurse	14; Lived in Europe; didn't understand but liked US music	Working Class	No	No
Keith (Creole)	26	Human Resources Partner	5; Played brother's tape on Fisher	Upper Middle	No	No (except

Black)			Price radio; liked it	Class		some)
Noel (Biracial)	33	State Board Agency Executive Director	16; Boyfriend played Tupac song; Intrigued; different	Middle Class	No	No (except younger)
Sasha (Black)	31	Spokesperson Media Personality Model	8; Secretly listened to songs at cousin's house	Upper Middle Class	No	No
Whitley (Black)	27	College Testing Center Director	15; Friends began downloading songs; felt "grown up."	Upper Middle Class	No	No